

Gandhi Memorial College Of Education Bantalab Jammu

ARUP KUMAR DUTTA

ASSAM'S BRAVEHEART

LACHIT BARPHUKAN



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ARUP KUMAR DUTTA



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ASSAM'S BRAVEHEART LACHIT BARPHUKAN
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FOREWORD

The Ahom Kingdom emerged in the northeastern part of India in 1228 AD when Chaulung Siu-Ka-Pha and his dedicated followers entered the Brahmaputra Valley, crossing the Patkai Hill ranges to establish their kingdom. During their remarkable reign of nearly six centuries, the Ahoms demonstrated remarkable valour and devotion to protect their homeland. They had engaged themselves in numerous battles and thwarted invasions. In their determined effort to preserve their territorial integrity, the Ahom dynasty successfully repelled Mughal invasions many times. Throughout their rule, the Ahom Swargadeos exhibited unwavering dedication and extraordinary courage in defence of their motherland. One figure that stands out in the narrative of resistance against Mughal aggression is Lachit Barphukan, a renowned Ahom general in one of the decisive battles on the river Brahmaputra.

Born on November 24, 1622, Lachit Barphukan matured amidst the backdrop of the Mughal-Ahom conflict, a circumstance that honed his military acumen and instilled in him a remarkable courage to confront his adversaries. His strategic brilliance and fearless

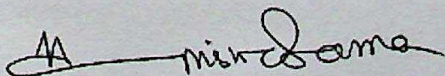
leadership facilitated significant victories over the Mughals, effectively stalling their advancements in Assam. Notably, his exemplary display of bravery during the pivotal battle of Saraighat in 1671 A.D., where he directed his forces from his sickbed, stands as a testament to his unwavering commitment to triumph. Lachit Borphukan's ingenuity in subduing the Mughal forces during the battle of Saraighat played a crucial role in transforming an imminent defeat into a resounding victory. The Battle of Saraighat was an eventful moment in the history of the nation as it played a decisive role in resisting the imperial Mughals. The war left an indelible mark into collective psyche of the whole of the Brahmaputra valley. The stories of leadership and courage of Lachit Barphukan and his soldiers continue to inspire the public's imagination even today.

Lachit Barphukan emerged as one of the most revered military strategists of medieval India, leaving behind a legacy from which contemporary military leaders can glean valuable insights into the intricacies of guerrilla warfare. Particularly, the Assamese naval force, under his leadership, garnered formidable strength and emerged as a determining factor in the defeat of the Mughals. Lachit Barphukan's astuteness in luring the Mughal forces into naval warfare, exploiting one of the strengths of the Assamese force, underscored his military genius, ultimately resulting in the triumph over the Mughals. He exemplified the notion that an army commander must tailor tactics to suit specific circumstances, showcasing a remarkable blend of courage, valour, patience, and strategic acumen.

I am elated to note that the book titled 'Assam's

Braveheart Lachit Barphukan' by Arup Kumar Dutta has provided us with the rich, authentic, and well-paced historical account it truly deserves. This book not only chronicles the rich and untold historical events of Assam but also captures how the legacy of Lachit Barphukan has had its influence on the posterity. The book is an ode to the extraordinary episodes of an outstanding individual who personified the spirit of patriotism and nationalism. Besides providing a vivid narrative of pivotal moments of Ahom dynasty, the author has also gone into the depth in giving additional information about Lachit Barphukan which were so long eluding us. The book is also very articulate in acknowledging that the Battle of Saraighat led by Assam's Braveheart Lachit Barphukan was a conclusive episode in the history of medieval Assam which left an abiding legacy both in the immediate aftermath as well as in the centuries that followed.

I trust that readers from various backgrounds will find the book captivating, and that they will be inspired by unwavering passion and devotion of Lachit Barphukan for his motherland. May his story ignite a sense of dedication among the readers, encouraging their continued contributions to the progress and resilience of this great nation.



(Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma)
H'nble Chief Minister, Assam



Publisher's Note

Publication Board Assam, established in the year 1958 with the vision to contribute to the enrichment of languages and literature of Assam, has been concentrating on publication of different rare works of literary, cultural and historical significance of the State as well as of the nation. The 'Book Selection Committee' has been playing a vital role in collection, publication, re-printing and preserving of the significant books of different areas including concerns and influences on literary and socio-cultural research. socio-cultural development from different angles have generated greater interest of the researchers of different margins.

This year, the Board, on recommendation of Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, Hon'ble Chief Minister, Assam has taken the initiative to publish the book 'Assam's Braveheart Lachit Borphukan' authored by Arup Kr. Dutta. Dr. Ranoj Pegu, Hon'ble Education Minister, Assam and Chairman, Publication Board Assam has himself monitored throughout this project. This book is the product of Chief Minister's grand scheme initiated in order to showcase the heroism and patriotism of Lachit at the national and international level in the occasion of four hundred years of birth ceremony

of Lachit Barphukan. It was only because of the courage and intelligence of Lachit that Assam remained free from the Islamic invasion during the mediaeval period. Author Dutta has portrayed Lachit Barphukan in this book emphasising upon on the socio-historical background. The government of Assam has adopted several schemes and steps to commemorate the pride of Lachit Barphukan. By the instruction of Hon'ble Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, Publication Board Assam has initiated translation of this book in all the constitutionally recognized Indian languages. This is the first kind of initiative where a book on the plot of Assam is being translated to all other Indian regional languages simultaneously. We express our gratitude to Hon'ble Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma for shouldering this great responsibility on us. We also thank author Arup Kr Dutta for completing this project investing his intellect and creative faculties. We also express our gratitude to all the translators of this book and Aparajita Pujari for her commendable job as in-charge of this project. It is expected that this book will help the researchers, scholars and students from multidisciplinary fields in gaining knowledge about the true patriotic hero Lachit Barphukan.

Pramod Kalita
Secretary
Publication Board Assam



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and armaments, are unanimous in their opinion that he was one of the greatest military strategists medieval India had seen, and that even modern army leaders can learn from the tactics of warfare adopted by him.

A salient lesson to be learnt from Lachit Barphukan the military strategist is that an army Commander has to adopt a specific tactic appropriate for a specific occasion. To wrest back Gauhati and Lower Assam usurped by the Mughal invaders (August 1667 to November 1667), and then successfully defend his gains (February 1669 to March 1671) against a retaliatory army, the first phase of his campaign was different in strategy from that pursued during the latter ones. It was a fast and furious advance which took full advantage of the elements of surprise and speed to totally overwhelm the unwary opponents and oust them from the land they had earlier occupied by force from the Ahom kingdom. No doubt, Lachit's army had to lay a siege lasting around two months to capture the all-important Itakhuli fort in order to retake Gauhati, but the speed with which they reached the fort had prevented the surprised Mughals manning it from summoning help from Dhaka.

The manner in which he captured the seemingly impregnable Itakhuli fort at Gauhati involved a plan of action that was nothing short of brilliant. Taking his time, he first isolated the fort and the garrison within it by eliminating one by one all the defensive Mughal detachments posted around it, thereby enabling his forces to completely surround it from all sides. Then, after a two-month long siege, in the dead of the night, he sent a few commando soldiers to stealthily scale a wall of the fort and disable the cannons mounted on its parapets by pouring water down their barrels. In the furious assault which followed, the Mughal defenders, unable to fire their cannons even as they were bombarded by Lachit's artillery both from land as well as the guns mounted on the ships moored on the Brahmaputra's river-bank, stood no chance, and capitulated in the matter of hours.

After having entrenched his forces in the recaptured river-port of Gauhati, Lachit embarked on the implementation of a series of defensive measures that would stymie the advance of the mammoth Mughal army sent to dislodge him. Then, displaying the patience of a spider in a web, he waited with fortitude as the Mughal fly finally entered the trap laid for it, thereby illustrating the virtue of patience as an aspect of any military strategy. The individual to whom he owed allegiance, the Ahom monarch, was not endowed with similar patience, and coerced his General to undertake, against his wishes, a pre-emptive strike upon his Mughal adversary, resulting in the tragic debacle at Alaboi which marked a low-point in Assamese warfare history.

It may be noted that when the Mughal army was about to cross into Assam's border, finding that his garrisons at the frontier outposts were none too successful in frontally attacking it, Lachit instructed them to fall back and make a slow retreat towards Gauhati. "The deputation of Ram Singha marked a new phase in Ahom Mughal relations. Unlike Assam's previous offensive war of recovery, the present was essentially a defensive war to retain possession of the recovered territory of Kamrup..... Realizing the futility of the opposition at the frontier posts, their General Lachit Barphukan adopted the new strategy of (i) evacuating them one by one, and leaving all territories west of Hajo to their fate (ii) and concentrating on the defence of Gauhati and the strategic centers around it so as to lure the unwary Mughals to the well-guarded Gauhati sector. This corresponds to what in modern war-craft is 'strategic retreat.'" (01)

As a military leader invested with the responsibility of defending his motherland from a foreign aggressor, Lachit firmly believed that the end, keeping the country safe, justified the means adopted, no matter how demeaning or underhand they might seem to be! The numerous and varied stratagems he employed to stem the advance of the powerful Mughal army boggles the mind. He took pains to study

the topography of the region he was to guard and used his knowledge to good effect, erecting strong fortifications at carefully chosen spots, especially beside the Brahmaputra which had always acted as a highway for invaders. In fact, along with the Ahom Prime Minister Atan Buragohain, he built a network of forts and ramparts which later was to prove to be impregnable to Ram Singha's powerful artillery.

He was not above employing crafty, underhand tactics such as asking his forces to show themselves to the enemy and then pretend to flee, thereby enticing them towards well-fortified traps to be ambushed; or using the evil reputation of the land to instil terror into the hearts of Mughal soldiers and rekindle their superstitious belief that Assam was a land of magic and sorcery through night-time dance of "skeletons" by his men. During the initial phase of the "strategic retreat," whenever his troops encamped on river banks at night, he instructed them to post trunks of plantain trees in their camps with a torch on each, so as to mislead the advancing enemy into thinking them to be soldiers thereby giving them the impression of the retreat of a vast army! Not confronting the enemy on open ground, and instead launching sudden, surprise attacks on Mughal encampments by small bands of Assamese soldiers who would then immediately vanish into the dark of the night—these and other tactics of guerrilla warfare may not have caused much real-term damage to the massive Mughal army, but they did serve to erode the morale of the soldiers. Ram Singha, whose "code of warfare" forbade fighting at night, called such tactics "Thieves' affairs," but Lachit retorted that it was lions who fight at night.

The ability to learn lessons from history, and employ earlier ploys to the current situation, is another attribute of a genius strategist. Lachit had as an example the invasion of Assam by Mir Jumla (1662-63) to guide him. The Mughal invader had succeeded in reaching the Ahom capital of Garhgaon in Upper Assam, but had been finally expelled through adoption of *daga-juddah* (guerrilla warfare) by the

Assamese. Lachit, in his fight against the Mughal forces under Raja Ram Singha, used similar hit-and-run tactics to good effect.

As a part of this strategy, he took full advantage of the various water-bodies that dotted the terrain around Gauhati as also the dense verdure, and used them to conceal war-boats and troops at select places which could launch guerrilla attacks on the enemy from the flanks and the rear. Apart from erecting forts and ramparts, he also undertook marvels of engineering constructions like wooden stockades on the mighty Brahmaputra that could withstand powerful currents and impede the enemy's armada, as well as temporary bridges of boats across the river to maintain communication between the armies on both the banks.

Few battles fought in India can match the complex but successful strategy that Lachit Barphukan employed before and during the Battle of Saraighat! It is a pity indeed that a magnificent leader of men like Lachit is not much known outside Assam, and the great Battle of Saraighat, which struck a crushing and defining blow to Aurangzeb's ambition of subjugating the Assamese and bringing the Ahom kingdom into his domain, is ignored by Indian historians.

Referring to this aspect, the pioneer scholar-historian Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan wrote: "The name of Lachit Barphukan has not travelled beyond the frontier of his own country. But in Assam, his motherland, the recollection of his patriotism has offered the same inspiration as that of Lord Nelson and Wellington in England; Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi in Italy; Maharana Pratap in Rajputana; and Shivaji Maharaja in Maharashtra..... Lachit Barphukan, the great hero of Assam, was a contemporary of Shivaji Maharaj, and like the latter stemmed the advance of Mughal imperialism in his land. In fact, the Assamese hero's great antagonist (i.e. Raja Ram Singha) was a person most intimately associated with the turning point in the career of the Maratha empire-builder, and his presence in Assam

at the head of a formidable army was the outcome of the part he played in that connection. Besides, we have evidence to prove that Shivaji's successes at one time had supplied an additional incentive to the Assamese to organize an effective opposition to Mughal aggressions in Eastern India." (02)

It is, of course, imperative that we study the actions and recorded pronouncements of Assam's Braveheart Lachit Barphukan if we are to understand his personality and the extent of his achievements. What emerges from a study of these is the portrait of a complex genius, an extraordinary military leader who could be impassive, yet capable of deep emotions, ruthless and stern to the point of seeming cruelty, yet very much humane and possessing empathy with the lowliest of the soldiers under him.

Lachit Barphukan, apart from being a magnificent leader of men, was above all a warrior, who demonstrated his martial prowess and mettle during every battle he engaged in. Not content to direct his soldiers and sailors safely from the rear he, *hengdang* raised and battle cries issuing from his throat, battled the enemy alongside them, galvanizing them into making their utmost efforts. Such an ability to inspire his soldiers was responsible for the sudden turn of Assamese fortunes in the Battle of Saraighat from a position of certain defeat.

His biggest asset was receptivity to advice of merit, as also logical criticism, and to frame his strategy accordingly. The war-council met regularly, where the defensive measures were discussed and debated upon each time. It was his good fortune that he had extraordinarily astute and capable lieutenants such as Atan Buragohain to guide and advise him, as well as offer suggestions without being reticent in voicing them.

Despite having an open mind to suggestions, everyone understood that Lachit was a stern disciplinarian, and would brook no dereliction of duty. He warned that anyone discovered neglecting the task assigned to him, or found to

be absent from a designated spot, would face his wrath, something understood by both officers and men. Lachit knew very well that, in order to repulse an attack by the Mughal forces and prevent a breach in the defences, it was imperative that every individual entrusted with responsibilities carry them out promptly and in a disciplined way. In order to instil such discipline he announced that he would decapitate anyone who neglected the assigned duties, no matter whether he be a high ranking officer or a common soldier. Ahom *buranjis* record that this order, communicated to all the camps put fear into the hearts of even officers of seniority and rank like Atan Buragohain!

But Shan laws stipulated that the right to award capital punishment vested only with the king. In decapitating his uncle for dereliction of duty, he violated this sacred Shan rule. However, Chakradhwaj Singha, appreciating his General's need to instil discipline into his men, wisely overlooked the transgression.

An individual of unshakeable integrity and absolute incorruptibility, Lachit Barphukan spurned every attempt by the Mughal Commander-in-Chief to bribe him, or provoke him by spreading canards. Just as he expected honesty from his officers, he was fair and honest towards them, and was not afraid to rebut comments from even the king if he considered them to be unjustified. For instance, chaffing at the protracted nature of the campaign against the Mughal invaders, Chakradhwaj Singha had reprimanded Lachit and threatened that he would inflict punishment if "my army was killed without fighting" and if anyone "refrained willingly from fighting."

In his response to this message, Lachit pointed out to the king that, despite the inequality of resources between the two armies, his forces had killed many soldiers of the enemy, and many prisoners and much spoils had been sent to Garhgaon. Thus, he continued, judging from his ever loyal service, the king's assessment of his conduct must be considered to be over hasty. To his credit, Chakradhwaj Singha conceded Lachit's rebuttal as justified.

Yet, far from being an implacable Commander-in-Chief, Lachit was a human being, capable of feeling negative emotions and reacting to negative developments. When he first beheld Raja Ram Singha's army sent to fight him, he is reported to have been disconcerted by its huge size, and tears rolled down from his eyes at the thought of the enormous responsibility thrust on his shoulders. But the chronicles also report that his great self-control enabled him to compose himself in a matter of moments and redevote himself into devising the strategy by which he could carry out that responsibility.

The Ahom *buranjis* also record that he was averse to sending soldiers to openly confront the Mughals on open, plain ground. Thus when the Ahom king Chakradhwaj Singha insisted that he send a force to attack the Mughals who were encamped on the Alaboi plains, he was in two minds. He knew that it would be foolish to pit his foot-soldiers against the Mughal cavalry; yet, as one who had sworn an oath of allegiance to his king, he could not go against the Sovereign's orders. His innate humanism was revealed when he expressed before Atan Buragohain as to how sad and disheartened he was by the death of so many of his men at Alaboi, and the inability of those ensconced far away from the battle-field to comprehend the ground-realities. It needed great tact on the Prime Minister's part to comfort the distraught General and instil in him the required confidence to resume his campaign with renewed vigour.

On another occasion king Udayaditya Singha, who succeeded Chakradhwaj Singha, openly disapproved of the action of his Barphukan in sending to him a proposal from Raja Ram Singha, since the Rajput Commander had not observed the protocol of despatching a letter containing his proposal through an official ambassador. The miffed monarch refused to send the articles he had arranged for the Mughal envoy's reception to Lachit at Gauhati.

Such marked disapproval on the part of his monarch, particularly the latter's occasional lack of acknowledgment of the sacrifices being made by his officers and men in the cause of king and country, disheartened Lachit. Nor were his spirits lifted by the advice of his senior lieutenants offered at that point of time that he negotiate the terms of a peace treaty with the Mughals and persuade Swargadeo Udayaditya Singha of the advisability of striking such a deal.

Such was his disheartenment that Lachit lost his resolve and was almost ready to advise the Ahom king that Gauhati and Lower Assam must be given back to the Mughals. It was once again left to the wise Prime Minister Atan Buragohain to forestall him from doing so by reminding Lachit of the sacrifice of thousands of his men who had laid down their lives in defending king and country.

All this and more project the human side of Assam's Brave heart while not detracting from his courage, determination and patriotism. He too was a deeply moral man with a high sense of honour, not merely of himself, but of his liege and his motherland. When, for instance, after the Saraighat Battle the Assamese soldiers pursuing the defeated Mughals sought his permission to fall upon the enemy and seize provisions and articles, Lachit forbade them from doing so, asserting that he did not want to tarnish the fair name of his king by plundering fleeing soldiers!

Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, the historian whose seminal research helped to bring Assam's Braveheart to the limelight, writes in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*.

"The study of the life of Lachit Barphukan, especially with reference to his conflicts with the Mughals, enables us to know the qualities which make a successful General, whose main rallying point is not the vastness of his resources or the numerical superiority of his army, but grim determination and intrepid courage..... Lachit Barphukan brought the Assamese army to the highest pitch of efficiency. Nowhere in recorded history had the Assamese

nation shown such capacity for organization, discipline and combined action as in Lachit Barphukan's war against the Mughals. For four long years the whole nation acted like one man. The slightest indication of slackness and delinquency was promptly and rigorously suppressed. Commanders and statesmen, grown grey in the service of the State, took their orders from the tender-aged generalissimo. Personal ease and comfort, considerations for one's kith and kin, gave way before sleepless vigilance and the long cherished dream of victory. The stronger elements in the character of the Assamese people were marshalled to the best advantage in offering a united front to the enemy. Not a word was uttered, not an act done, which was likely to bring a slur upon the prestige of the country or the dignity of the Commanders.

"For lessons of disinterested patriotism and leadership one should turn again and again to Lachit Barphukan's conflicts with the Mughals. His adversary the Mughal General, overpowered and crestfallen, uttered the following eulogy of the Assamese Commander-in-Chief and those who supported him, in a spirit of admiration characteristic of the Kuchch was of Amber: 'Glory to the King! Glory to the Counsellors! Glory to the Commanders! One single individual leads all the forces! Even I, Ram Singha, being personally on the spot, have not been able to find any loophole and opportunity!'" (03)

However, in order to fully appreciate the extent of Lachit's achievement, it is imperative that we first take a look at the broader historical canvas and place him within its context.





THE BROAD CANVAS

Since primordial times the fertile and verdant Brahmaputra Valley, which formed a natural corridor linking mainland India to China and South East Asia, acted as a magnet attracting migrants from all directions. Particularly, from around 2000 years ago, there were periodic migrations of Mongoloid tribes from western China to the hills and valleys of the North-East to give them a dominant place in the ethnic mosaic of this region. While the Austroasiatic are believed to be autochthon, the Dravidian and Caucasoid element sentered from the west, thereby imparting an added complexity to that mosaic.

Various books on the ethnologic profile of the North-East in general and Assam in particular attest to the complex dynamics which played out in this region to impart to it its present ethnic character. For instance, the following was stated by the renowned historian Padma Vibhushan Suniti Kumar Chatterjee commented: "Different branches of the great Sino-Tibetan speaking people which had their *Nidus* near the headwaters of Yangtze Kiang and the Hwang Ho rivers, to the west of China, pushed south and west, probably from 2000 BC onwards, and tribes of these infiltrated into India mostly along the western course of

the Brahmaputra. The great Bodo tribe would appear to have been established over the Valley of the Brahmaputra fairly early, and to have extended into North and East Bengal into North Bihar. The North Assam tribes of the Abors and Akas, Daflas and Miris, and Mishmis appear to have come later, and to have established themselves in the mountains to the north of the Brahmaputra plains already in occupation of the Bodos, and by some Austric and possibly also by some Dravidian tribes which preceded the Mongoloid Bodos in this tract — Bodo and Austric and Dravidian with Aryan speaking elements from Bengal and Bihar with the Siamese-Chinese section of the Mongoloids in their Thai tribe of the Ahoms finally becoming transformed to the Aryan Assamese speaking masses of the Valley This can be looked upon as Assam's great contribution to the synthesis of cultures and fusion of races that took place in India — a synthesis which had started in prehistoric times when two distinct races found that they had to live together in the same country — the Austric and the Mongoloid, and the Dravidian and the Austric, and the Dravidian and the Mongoloid. This synthesis took a definite shape, and its character and line of movement was fixed for ever when..... the Indian man as the result of the fusion of the Aryan and Dravidian, Mongoloid and Austric came into being at the end of the Vedic period (i.e. by 1000 BC.)" (*The Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India*, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, (1970) Department of Publication, University of Gauhati, Assam.

The constant but periodic influx initiated a cycle of conflict and synthesis till the migrant settlers spread out to colonize the entire region in the form of small kingdoms or principalities, with each ethnic entity having its own vibrant and colourful culture. Occasionally, the ambitious chief of

an individual principality would assert dominance and enlarge his domain, which led to the creation of bigger empires like Pragjyotishpur or Kamrup of ancient times. But these disintegrated with the passage of the years, and by the 12th-13th century this region came to be populated by an array of smaller tribal communities.

Then, in 1228 A.D., a group of Shan or Tai warriors, led by an intrepid leader named Sukapha, left its original home in the Shan country, and entered the Brahmaputra Valley through the Patkai range of mountains. After decades of meandering Sukapha, in 1253, finally set up a small kingdom with its capital at Che-Rai-Doi, which later grew to become the powerful Ahom Empire. ⁽⁰⁴⁾

Till this region was annexed by the British in 1826, for six centuries, Sukapha and his descendants reigned over a greater part of the Brahmaputra Valley, first from Cheraidai, later from important capitals like Garhgaon. Few dynasties in the world had enjoyed such a lengthy period of almost unbroken rule. There were a number of factors ensuring this longevity, one of the most important being the establishment of a rigorous hierarchy of governance, strictly observing the tenets laid down by the Shans or Tais since ancient times. The king, whose ancestors according to the Ahom *buranjis* or chronicles were descendants of the gods who had come down from heaven, and therefore was designated as a *Swargadeo*, was the supreme authority, and his orders had to be followed unquestioningly; any recalcitrance observed on the part of anyone invited the most severe punishments.

Next in the hierarchy were the chief nobles, known as the *patra-mantris*, comprising initially the Buragohain and the Bargohain, but later, as the Ahom kingdom expanded and the area and number of subjects increased, the posts

of the Barpatragohain, the Barbarua and the Barphukan were added for administrative convenience. The chief nobles had to carry out the orders of the king, advise him on various aspects of the administration and, in general, ensure that the State functioned smoothly. Despite being subservient to the king, the *patra-mantris* were invested with enormous powers themselves, and could collectively depose a king. Though there were a few exceptions, this proved to be an effective deterrent to any Ahom monarch becoming a tyrant and acting arbitrarily. The chief nobles were also invested with the onerous responsibility of choosing a successor after the death of any king.

Succession to the Ahom throne was not always a hereditary process; this was one of the primary reasons behind the longevity of the Ahom Dynasty. While other dynasties all over the world mostly observed the principle of an immediate progeny inheriting the throne, thereby raising the possibility of a dynasty suddenly ending because of the lack of an heir, succession amongst the Ahoms was more fluid because of the division of the gradually enlarging royal family into *phaids* and investing *mels* upon them. "The sons, wives and other near relations of the reigning monarch were given estates which were generally known as *mels*. The Charingia *mel*, the Tipamia *mel*, the Namrupia *mel*, the Saru *mel* and the Maju *mel* were generally conferred on the sons, brothers and nephews of the king and the beneficiaries held the title of Rajas....." (05)

Thus, if the monarch died without leaving behind a male heir, or any suitable successor amongst his immediate relatives, the chief nobles could look to a prince among the various *phaids* and *mels* and place him on the Ahom throne, thereby ensuring that an individual who had the same royal blood as the progenitor Sukapha, would inherit the throne

and the continuation of the Ahom Dynasty could be maintained.

Below the *patra-mantris* there was a successive hierarchy of nobles and officers right down to the individuals who carried out lowly duties. Amongst the senior- most officers were the Phukans, then the Baruas, twelve Rajkhowas, a number of Katakis, Kakatis and Dolois, as also Hazarikas, Saikias and Boras. The systematic gradation of administrators, each enjoined to perform assigned duties religiously no matter how insignificant these might be, was instrumental in keeping the wheels of governance running smoothly.

Another important factor resulting in the longevity of the Ahom Dynasty was the *paik* system. All the male members amongst the common people were called *paiks* and, instead of paying revenue to the State, had to render service as workers or soldiers. "The *paiks* were organized into *gots*.....one member of each *got* was obliged to be present, in rotation, for such work as was required of him, and during his absence from home, the other members were expected to cultivate his land and keep his family supplied with food. In time of peace, it was the custom to employ the *paiks* on public works; and this is how the enormous tanks and the high embanked roads in Assam came into existence. The *paiks* were further arranged by *khels*, which were provided with a regular gradation of officers; twenty *paiks* were commanded by a Bora, one hundred by a Saikia, one thousand by a Hazarika, three thousand by a Rajkhowa and six thousand by a Phukan; the whole were under as rigid discipline as a regular army..... The *khels* were distributed among the high nobles in the manner as described, and each official had a number of *paiks* assigned to him in lieu of pay....." (06)

The *paik* system obviated the necessity of maintaining a huge and expensive army as the Ahoms had a militia which could be mobilized at short notice by the owner of the *khel* working through his subordinates. "Some preliminary knowledge of his duties, civil and military, being implanted in each *paik* by his previous service in the State, he had to undergo a brushing up or refresher course at his allotted headquarters or the metropolis, combined with the intensive training specially needed for the occasion..... Government had not to resort to formal conscription as the services of the whole body of adult effectives could be commanded in times of emergency." ⁽⁰⁷⁾

Moreover, by expanding their kingdom, subjugating other tribes, bringing the valley under a single administration and providing a generally enlightened and stable rule, the Ahoms initialized a process of homogenization which resulted in the pre-colonial Assamese nation being born. Its reign witnessed the synthesis of different tribes living during the medieval period in the Brahmaputra Valley and the evolution of a distinctive Assamese language, culture and nationalist identity. Greater political and cultural intercourse, intermarriages and other social exchanges between the tribes gradually broke racial and cultural barriers and imbued a solidarity and nationalistic spirit to the people who were also bonded together by the religious and cultural renaissance ushered in by Vaishnava saints such as Mahapurush Sankardev. In the course of time, people from outside ceased to refer to the inhabitants of Kamrup as Ahoms, but instead called them the Assamese.

Naturally enough, some of the Ahom kings had long tenures and some extremely brief. The reigns of some witnessed political, economic and cultural progress, while

those of others were nondescript and unremarkable interregnums. Among the great rulers who followed Sukapha we have Suhungmung (1497-1539). Till he ascended the throne, the Ahom kings who had succeeded the progenitor Sukapha had been content to remain within the small kingdom set up by him. Suhungmung's reign is notable for the fact that it was the first time that the Ahoms left the confines of that kingdom and began a series of campaigns to subjugate major neighbouring tribes such as the Chutiyas and the Kacharis. The expansionist process initiated by this monarch, with the passage of time, was further enhanced by some of the kings who followed, and culminated in the Ahom kingdom extending across the entire Brahmaputra Valley, from Sadiya in the east to Goalpara in the west.

However, the widening of their realm brought the Ahom rulers into conflict, for the very first time, with the Koch Empire of King Naranarayan as well as the Muslim rulers of Bengal. Though Suhungmung himself secured notable victories against his new opponents, the adverse consequences grew visible in the time of his successor, Suklenmung, when in 1546 a Koch force under Sukladhvaz, also known as Chilarai (kite-king), inflicted defeat upon Assamese defenders, but could finally be repulsed by cutting off the aggressor's supplies. ⁽⁰⁸⁾

In 1563, during the reign of Suklenmung's son Sukhampha, also known as Khora (lame) Raja, Chilarai made another excursion and on this occasion the Koch General emerged victorious, not only defeating the Assamese and forcing the Ahom monarch to escape to Chorai-khorong at Namrup on the foothills of the Naga Hills, but also entering the Ahom capital Garhgaon and occupying it. It was only after the Ahom king acknowledged

Koch superiority, yielded large tracts of occupied land, allowed Assamese hostages to be taken, and paid war indemnity could Chilarai be persuaded to return to the Koch capital of Kochbehar. ⁽⁰⁹⁾

But, a few years later, the Koch Empire itself faced danger of being overrun by the Mughals of Delhi! The Koch monarch Naranarayan and his Commander Chilarai had to turn their attention to the west, enabling Sukhampha to wrest back the territory ceded to them. Despite this, Naranarayan released the sons of the Ahom nobles, who had earlier been taken as hostages, safely to their families, motivated by a desire not to antagonize the Assamese, thereby covering the eastern flank of the Koch kingdom, even as he resisted the Mughals in the west.

By then the Koch kingdom encompassed almost the entire Lower Assam and proved to be a barrier to direct assaults on Assam by the Mughals. Unfortunately, a mistake on the part of Naranarayan resulted in the weakening and final destruction of his empire. Being childless he nominated the son of Chilarai, named Raghudev, to be his successor. But at an advanced age a son was born to him!

Wanting to be fair, around 1581, Naranarayan divided his kingdom in two, giving half each to Raghudev and his own son Laxminarayan. After Naranarayan's death in 1584, the Nawab of Gaur and the Ahom king could soon take over the two vastly weakened Koch kingdoms. ⁽¹⁰⁾ Sometime later the Mughals conquered the Gaur kingdom, and from then onwards, for a century and a half, there were repeated and direct conflicts between them and the Ahom rulers, till it fell to the lot of Lachit Barphukan to bring an end to Mughal expansionist ambitions.



The first direct confrontation between the Mughals and the Assamese took place during the reign of Susengpha, also known as Budha Swarga Narain or Pratap Singha. Some developments of the early 17th century set the stage for such a confrontation. One such incident of 1615 was the murder of a Muslim trader near Kaliabar by Assamese soldiers on suspicion that he was a spy, which led the Mughal Governor of Bengal Sheikh Qasim to send a sizable army on a punitive expedition. The Assamese were defeated in the engagement which took place at the mouth of the Bharali River. However, the reinforcements led by Pratap Singha, in a surreptitious night attack, routed the Mughals. While many of the invaders were slain or put to flight, an immense amount of booty fell into the hands of the Assamese, including elephants, horses and a large number of warships, boats, cannons, guns and other munitions of war.⁽¹¹⁾

From this maiden battle, for the next couple of decades, a sporadic series of skirmishes took place between the Mughals who were ensconced in the erstwhile Koch territory in Lower Assam with Hajo as the main base, and the Assamese forces of Pratap Singha who was bent on ousting the Mughals, with no definitive gains for either party. For a while the Assamese, in the latter half of the 1630s, aided by local tribal chiefs, managed to capture much of the territory under Mughal occupation, including Hajo, but could not hold on to them for very long. Reinforced by troops and ships from the Nawab of Dhaka, Abdussalam, the Governor of Hajo, succeeded in driving them out. While the Barphukan's son was killed, the Ahom *buranjis* record that a *firangi*, or white foreigner, the first European to have set foot in the Ahom kingdom, was captured during the fighting and sent to Garhgaon.

But, empowered by fresh supplies of ships, men and material, the Assamese renewed their campaign against the Mughals, and retook Hajo, capturing a great deal of loot, including two thousand guns and seven hundred horses. The brick buildings which the Mughals had erected were levelled to the ground. Pratap Singha's forces went on to clear entire Kamrup and Goalpara of Mughal occupation; a Koch prince, Chandra Narayan, was installed as the ruler of the cleared area, with many zamindars of the region pledging allegiance to him.

The campaign of both the Ahoms and the Mughals during the 1630s had been a see-saw battle all the way! ⁽¹²⁾ Determined to settle it for one and all, the Nawab of Dhaka sent a sizable force of cavalry and matchlock men along with an escort of twenty-five war sloops, under the command of his brother Mir Zainuddin to restore Mughal supremacy in Lower Assam. Several engagements took place throughout 1637 at Dhubri and Jogighopa and in the end the Assamese were defeated. Mir Zainuddin continued his unstoppable advance, retaking Mughal territory both on the north and south bank of the Brahmaputra, till he reached Saraighat, where Pratap Singha was encamped with his fleet.

The ensuing battle saw the Assamese being worsted once again despite the monarch's personal involvement; his forces at Pandu, Agiyathuri, Saraighat and the Kajali fort at the mouth of the Kalang River were defeated; five hundred sloops and three hundred guns fell into the hands of the victors. The Mughals spent some time in consolidating their rule in Kamrup and effecting a financial settlement of the re-occupied territory. Mir Nurullah was appointed the Thanadar, with his headquarters at Delhi.

Pratap Singha retreated to the well-fortified stronghold at Kaliabar. From there he undertook a counter-attack, reoccupying the Kajali fort but could progress no further. Nor did Mir Zainuddin show any inclination to continue his advance and, apparently, both antagonists by then had become tired of the prolonged war and, by 1639, had exhausted their resources.

Thus that year, the Ahom king represented by the warrior-statesman Momai Tamuli Barbarua, and the Mughals represented by Allah Yar Khan, negotiated a treaty whereby the western limits of the former's realm were fixed at Barnadi River on the north bank of the Brahmaputra which debouched at the foot of the Manikarneswar Hill, and Asurar Ali, a road to the east of Gauhati, on the south bank.⁽¹³⁾

"By the Treaty of Asurar Ali, signed early in February, 1639, each side agreed to accept the territorial integrity of the other in respective dominions. The river Bar Nadi in *Uttarkul* and the causeway (*Ali*) of Asur in *Dakhinkul* became the boundaries of Mughal Kamrup and Assam on both sides of the Brahmaputra. The king of Assam for the first time recognized Mughal supremacy in Kamrup and agreed not to interfere. Its Mughal Faujadar acknowledged the independent authority of the former and forsook all territorial ambitions east of the Bar Nadi and of the Kalang on the two banks of the Brahmaputra. Gauhati came under the Mughals. Trade and commercial intercourse were established between the two parties."⁽¹⁴⁾

During the next twenty years, the country west of this boundary line remained in the possession of the Mughals; the whole territory from Gauhati to the Manas River, which debouches into the Brahmaputra opposite Goalpara, there by passed into their hands and they introduced their own

form of administration and revenue collection system there. The Sarkar of Kamrup during that period was governed by Mughal Faujadars from their headquarters at Gauhati.

However, though a treaty had been signed, as often happens between two mutually antagonistic parties, a state of perpetual cold war continued between them, marked by a number of incidents which required diplomatic intervention. For example, in 1640 a Mughal merchant named Byamat Khan entered Assam without official permission and was accosted by one Sattrusen, the Assamese frontier officer at Singri. Humiliated at this, the merchant killed three Assamese, and the officer retaliated by imprisoning 23 Mughal subjects. The Mughal Faujadar had to send envoys to the Ahom Barbarua in an effort to obtain clemency. Moreover, there were sustained friction on issues such as encroachment upon land, elephant-catching rights, non-return of political fugitives et al, and these continued to be bones of contention between the Ahoms and the Mughals. ⁽¹⁵⁾



Pratap Singha, who died in 1641, had three sons, Surampha, Sutyinpha and Sai. Though the eldest son Surampha was entitled to the throne according to Shan customs, and was offered the kingship by the chief nobles, the youngest brother Sai conspired against him and was executed after being captured. Surampha himself, however, proved to totally lack either the quality of leadership or the required morality and the chief nobles, soon exasperated with his immoral ways, deposed, exiled and finally killed him and made Sutyinpha the king.

The new king, who was also known as the Nariya (ailing) Raja because of his indifferent health, and also

Kekora (crooked) Raja because of a curvature of the spine, proved equally ineffectual, so in November 1648 he was deposed.⁽¹⁶⁾ His son Sutamla, who assumed the Hindu name Jaydhwaj Singha (1648-1663), was placed on the throne with great fanfare. This monarch was ambitious; he could not tolerate what he considered to be perpetual assaults by the Mughals on Ahom dignity, and his life's goal became to wrest back the land ceded to the Mughals and once more extend the Ahom Empire to the dimensions temporarily achieved by Suhungmung or his father, Pratap Singha. Though internal strife and uprisings by some vassals ensured that he could not immediately set about fulfilling his objective, he took the precaution of preparing for this eventuality when the opportune moment arrived.

Such a moment came in 1657 when the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan fell gravely ill and a tussle for the Delhi throne broke out between his four sons — Dara, Shuja, Murad and Aurangzeb. Learning of his father's illness Prince Shuja, who then was the Subedar of Bengal, gathered a large army and marched towards Agra. Not only was Bengal left leaderless, but also Mughal fortifications on the eastern edges of Bengal became very thinly manned and without the flotilla of war-boats.

Prananarayan, the Raja of Kochbehar under the vassalage of the Mughal emperor, was quick to seize the vacuum these developments had created in Lower Assam. He declared independence, attacked the Mughal Faujadar at Gauhati, Mir Lutfulla Shiraji, and began annexing the Mughal-occupied areas there. Jaydhwaj Singha too made his move, pushing forward with a huge army and fleet towards Gauhati. Caught in a pincer the Mughal Faujadar fled to Dhaka, leaving behind twenty cannons and a number of horses and guns which he had no time to remove.

Suddenly the Assamese and the Koches found themselves confronting each other. Pranaranayan advanced a proposal to share the vacated territory—him taking the half on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and the Assamese on the south bank—one that was summarily rejected. The Koch army was quickly pushed out from the bounds of Kamrup beyond the River Sankosh.

For the first time in Ahom history the entire Brahmaputra Valley came under Assamese suzerainty. Chengmun Rajasahur Barphukan and Pikchai Chetia, based in Gauhati, were put in charge of the newly occupied territory. The entire population of Lower Assam, except the heads of the Vaisnav monasteries and temple priests, was reallocated to Upper Assam, in the mistaken assumption that the Mughals would not waste their resources trying to recover territory that would yield no revenue! For a year and a half the entire Kamrup region was reduced to a barren wilderness.⁽¹⁷⁾

According to the *Alamgirnamah* of Mirza Muhammad Kazim (English translation by Vansittart H.) the Assamese also made forays beyond Kamrup towards the south, plundering and depredating any settlements they came across. Under the leadership of Baduli Phukan, Lapeti Phukan and Phulbarua Phukan they made forays beyond Kamrup, looting and pillaging, reaching close to Dhaka itself, and kidnapping a number of Mughal inhabitants of that region and sending them to Upper Assam. The Muslim historian Ghulam Hussain Salim in his chronicle *Riaju-a-Salatin* recorded the extent of Assamese depredation. "The Assamese," he wrote, "raised the standard of daring and insurrection, and without contest, they conquered the province of Kamrup, swept it with the broom of plunder, carried by force to their own country all and everything,

including the moveable and immoveable effects of the people, pulled down the edifices, left no trace of fertility, and reduced the whole province to one plain level ground.”⁽¹⁸⁾



In the mean while, in July 1658, at Delhi, Aurangzeb worsted his brothers to seize the Mughal throne. In June 1660 he appointed one of his most powerful nobles, Mir Jumla, as the Governor of Bengal, with the express order that he must punish the Raja of Araccan for giving shelter to his surviving brother and rival Prince Shuja, and also to teach a lesson to the upstart Koches and the Ahoms.

It is not clear whether Mir Jumla suspected that the cunning Aurangzeb harboured ulterior motives for appointing him to the post or charging him with the above responsibilities. After all, he had helped finance Aurangzeb's successful war of succession and his appointment could be taken as a reward. Perhaps despite being ambitious in nature and eager to make a reputation for himself, he could not envisage that the Emperor could see in him a potential threat to the Delhi throne. But the fact remained that Mir Jumla was indeed a powerful man. As the Vizier of Golconda, the grandeur of his palace and seraglio had caused amazement to foreign visitors. Aurangzeb, certainly, thought he would be safer with Mir Jumla being far away from Delhi, and charged with the imperial duty of conducting a military campaign, especially in Assam which was notorious as a land from where no outsider ever returned!⁽¹⁹⁾

But there being immediate constraints to a campaign against the Raja of Araccan, Mir Jumla thought it more prudent to engage his forces first against the Koches and

then the Ahoms, with himself leading the campaign." In his (Aurangzeb's) *farman* he wanted the Mir to conquer Assam and Araccan after settling the affairs of Bengal. But it was the Mir who took the Emperor's permission to postpone the Araccan expedition and to invade Kochbehar and Assam. Imperial prestige, the safety of imperial dominions and the release of Muslim captives of war demanded the chastisement of the Koch and Ahom rulers. Further, the Mir detected some signs of a crack in Ahom system of feudatory allies and so considered the situation to be favourable. Jay Narayan of Ghila Vijaypur (whom the Assamese had earlier installed as the Raja of Kamrup), had already deserted the Ahom rulers to escape punishment for his failure to redeem some boastful promises to reconcile Bhavnath and the Assamese, and come to join the Mir, and acquaint him with the situation in Kamrup and Assam."

(20)

Some Ahom *buranjis* state that when Mir Jumla was appointed the Governor of Bengal, Jaydhvaj Singha had sent an envoy to him to say that the Ahom king had taken possession of Mughal land in Lower Assam only to protect it from the Koches, and he was ready to hand it over to anyone the Governor might depute. So Rashid Khan had been sent with a small force to take back the land. On his approach the Ahoms decamped from Dhubri and fell back beyond Manas. But Rashid Khan suspected a trap and ceased his advance, informing that he would carry on negotiations while awaiting the larger army. The Ahom monarch punished the two retreating Phukans (Dihingia and Lahui) and appointed Manthir Bharali Barua, a non-Ahom, Hindu Kayastha store-keeper of the Bejdoloi family, as Commander of the Lower Assam army. Fort Jogighopa at the mouth of the Manas River was strengthened and a

new fort on the opposite bank of the Brahmaputra was constructed at Pancharatan by the Ahom Captain Ahataguria Lahon Phukan and Kandu Phukan. Some Ahom *buranjis* state that Mir Jumla through his envoys expressed the wish to desist from invading Assam if the Ahom king restored the whole of Mughal Kamrup, send his daughter with a suitable tribute and promised to abstain from future aggression, demands he was to reiterate later. ⁽²¹⁾

Soon suspecting that Jaydhvaj Singha had no intention of returning Lower Assam, Mir Jumla grew determined to lead a campaign, first against the Koches and then the Assamese. On November 1, 1661, accompanied by Dilir Khan, he left Khizpur with a huge army of 12,000 cavalry, 30,000 infantry, a powerful artillery and over 300 floating batteries or war-ships called *ghurabs* manned by Europeans, each having 14 cannons and five dozen sailors, and towed by 4 *kusahs* or long row-boats. From the Bengal border, scouts helped this army to move over a little known path to enter Kochbehar in December 1661. The Koches caved in, the Raja fled to Bhutan, and Mir Jumla annexed the kingdom without any resistance, and set up a Mughal pattern of administration, including the levying of revenue on the farmers. ⁽²²⁾

Then, leaving a garrison of 5,000 men in Kochbehar, Mir Jumla set out for Assam on January 4, 1662 and was joined by Rashid Khan at Rangamati. He sent two envoys, Lalua Beg and Horam Raikh, to Jaydhvaj once again asserting his demand that the imperial territory be returned. The Ahom king now retorted that it had been territory belonging to the Koches and not the Mughals which were under the occupation of the Assamese, so the question of returning it did not arise. An enraged Mir Jumla then commenced what turned out to be a disastrous campaign

for the Assamese people. The Mughal juggernaut advanced rapidly without facing much resistance; the vastly outnumbered Assamese garrison at the Jogighopa fort ⁽²³⁾, which was further debilitated due to a cholera epidemic, fled without putting up much of a fight to Saraighat and Pandu.

Mir Jumla's army moved forward both across the north and south bank of the Brahmaputra, with the *ghurabs* following behind on the river. The going was difficult; the soldiers had to cut their way through dense foliage to hack out a path which the cavalry could take, but slow progress was made. Learning of his advance, Jaydhwaj Singha hastily sent reinforcements to Saraighat and Pandu, but the Mughals overran both even before these reached the forts there. Gauhati fell on February 4, 1662, and the garrisons stationed there were slaughtered in a night attack.

News of these setbacks demoralized soldiers stationed in other forts on the way, and though some offered resistance, Mir Jumla's army had a comparatively easy and steady passage, till it reached the Ahom fort at Simalugarh. This fort was situated in a strategically advantaged location and heavily protected by walls with battlements on which cannons were mounted, as also by trenches and ditches. Rather than storm it, Mir Jumla, in order to prevent loss of lives among his army, decided to lay siege to it. "But even cannonade from entrenchments thrown up within gunshot failed to damage the thick walls of the fort. The defenders, too, subjected the invaders to 24 hours heavy artillery fire, 'from morn to eve, and dusk to dawn.' As frontal siege did not produce quick results, the Mir revised his strategy. He decided to encircle the fort and attack it simultaneously from two sides. This was carried out by Dilir Khan Daubai, assisted by Farhad Khan and Mahmud

Beg Bakhshi. Though the party was misled by the guide, the son of an Assamese Chief, Dilir Khan finally succeeded, though his elephant got 25 arrow-shots, in scaling the wall during the midnight of 25 February.”⁽²⁴⁾ Finally, on February 26, the resistance offered by the Ahoms in Simalugarh could be overcome and Mir Jumla himself entered the fort and was wonderstruck by the strength of the fortification.

The detachment stationed at the next fortification at Samdhara, learning of the fate of Simalugarh, blew up the stock of gunpowder and fled. Mir Jumla placed a garrison at Samdhara and appointed a Faujadar to govern the Kaliabar area. As his army moved forward, the fleet which followed found itself attacked by seven-eight hundred Assamese ships. “After easily occupying Kaliabar, Mir Jumla left it on 2 March. As the bank of the Brahmaputra was hilly he had to take a level route six miles away. Taking advantage of the isolation of the Mughal fleet, an Assamese armada 600-700 strong under the Bargohain suddenly swooped on 100 Mughal boats anchored at Kukurakata above Kaliabar in the evening of 3 March, during the temporary absence of the Mughal admiral, Ibn Hussain. The Assamese, being upstream, also had the current in their favour. It was a crisis for the Mughal *nawwara* which was about to be engulfed and pounded by the Assamese.....the close cooperation of the Mughal and European admirals, who knew better techniques and had better arms enabled them to hold their own till the timely arrival of succour under Muhammad Mumin Beg Ekkataz Khan, deputed by the Mughal General, which frightened the Assamese. The Assamese Admiral (Tamuli Dalai) had, Glanius tell us, neglected to cut off supplies of provisions of the Mughals by attacking their *nawwara* above Gauhati, as ordered by

the Raja. The Mughals destroyed nearly 300 ships and captured about 400 'carrying big guns' and at least 21,000 men, and slew others. This was a naval disaster of the first magnitude and it effectively crippled the Assamese navy for a time."⁽²⁵⁾

Discovering a pathetic weakness and lack of the will to fight on the part of his army, Jaydhwaj Singha effected major changes amongst the top officers, and appointed Bahgaria Arjun Gohain Khanikar Barua, (being the full name of the great warrior-statesman Atan Buragohain) to command both the north and south bank armies. Instructions were sent to him by the king to concentrate his troops at Lakhau, at the confluence of Dihing and the Brahmaputra, and oppose the advancing Mughal army. But by then, given the momentum it had attained, nothing could resist Mir Jumla's mighty army. The Dihing being shallow at that time of the year, the fleet was left anchored there while the Mughals marched on foot through Gajpur and Tiromani, meeting with little or no resistance.

"The task of defence now devolved on Atan, appointed the Buragohain in January 1662, and assisted by Baghchowal Khamon Rajmantri and two brothers, Naobaicha Phukan and Chengmun Phukan. The Buragohain advised his men 'go on killing your enemy, but do not allow yourself to be killed.' He devised unique methods called *daga-juddah* corresponding to guerrilla warfare of modern times. Awaiting the advent of rains and floods, the Ahoms withdrew to the hills. Never daring to openly face the Mughals, they adopted harassing tactics: (i) surprise raids and night attacks, ambushades, kidnapping, shooting or killing stragglers in search of forage or firewood; the captives tortured with a special iron device, returned to their camps but ultimately died; (ii) hindering

or cutting off food supplies on transit, paralyzing the Mughal commissariat and camps; (iii) destroying stores of powder and paddy or boats to prevent their seizure by the Mughals, according to the principles of "scorched earth" policy; (iv) occasional retaliation by open skirmishes or encounters (not battles). The Ahoms failed to defeat Mir Jumla in battle but their defensive warfare for nine months contributed to the erosion of patience of the victors." ⁽²⁶⁾

News was brought to Mir Jumla that the Ahom king had gathered a thousand boats close to the capital Garhgaon to remove his personal effects from the city; it meant that the monarch was bent on leaving his capital. The Mughal Commander-in-Chief at once sent a flying column to intercept the evacuation and seize properties not yet removed. On entering the capital Garhgaon on March 17, 1662 Mir Jumla was delighted to discover that everything could not be removed due to his ploy of sending a flying column. Eighty-two elephants yet remained in the palace, along with around three lakh worth of gold and silver, as also granaries full of thousands of maunds of rice.

Meanwhile Swargadeo Sutamla alias Jaydhwaj Singha, had fled to Chorai-khorong at Namrup, along with his family, some nobles and five thousand men. The Bargohain had fled to Tira; other senior officials took shelter in the sattras of Majuli; the Ahom forces were totally disorganized and the future of the kingdom itself appeared to be bleak. By then the people had begun to call him *Bhaganiya Raja* or a derogatory title which translated meant "the king who fled from his realm"! The realization dawned on him that in trying to realize his ambition of recapturing Lower Assam from the Mughals he had bitten off more than he could chew. Now his only hope of succour rested with Atan Buragohain. ⁽²⁷⁾

“During the whole expedition the Mughals had seized six hundred and seventy-five cannons, including one which threw balls weighing more than two hundred pounds, about 9,000 matchlocks and other guns, a large quantity of gunpowder, saltpetre, iron shields, sulphur and lead, and more than a thousand ships, many of which accommodated from sixty to eighty sailors. It is said that Mir Jumla opened a mint at Garhgaon and caused money to be struck there in the name of the Delhi Emperor.....”⁽²⁸⁾ He also set up administrative sub-headquarters at different places such as Mathurapur, Ramdang, Trimohini, Gajpur, Silpani, Abhaypur etc. From Lakhau westward posts were also established along the Brahmaputra right up to Gauhati. All this was an indication that the Mughal leader was confident of being able to retain his hold over Assam and even press onwards after the rainy season ended.

“Mir Jumla could conquer Kamrup and Assam within five months. But he could neither win the people’s hearts nor enjoy their unstinted allegiance nor yet exercise complete authority. The establishment of a settled, stable Government was out of the question. The utmost he could do was set up a military rule. Military outposts were established as the Mughals advanced so as to maintain the line of communications with Bengal, to retain hold over the conquests, to checkmate Ahoms raids and to conciliate the peasants. Some places were guarded in a sense according to their importance..... To protect Garhgaon and Mathurapur the Mir occupied nearly 100 surrounding villages with the help of deserters and established outposts all around..... Mir Jumla had all war spoils collected, listed and guarded by Mir Murtaza and his men, e.g. cannons, *zamburaks*, muskets, gunpowder, elephants etc. as imperial property..... By exhuming the graves of Ahom princes and

nobles (*maidams*), revealed by some Assamese guides, for three months he secured property worth Rs. 90,000 and removed even the bones of the dead. Jaydhwaj bewailed: 'Misery me, I have not been able to protect even the bones of my ancestors!' Glanius testified to the wealth secured from the graves, while Manucci saw at Dhaka the Mir's huge boats loaded with booty."⁽²⁹⁾

But his desire for a longer stay at Assam and making it an extension of the Mughal Empire was not to be! That year the monsoons commenced early, and weeks of continuous downpour kept the Mughals hemmed in within the capital and hindered them from acquiring even essentials such as food. At the same time, Atan Buragohain, assisted by Rajmantri Naobaicha Phukan and Chengmun Phukan, inspired the Assamese forces to launch a campaign of guerrilla warfare of the type mentioned earlier, cutting off food supplies and creating famine conditions within Garhgaon. At the end of May Mir Jumla sent Farhad Khan with a handpicked bunch of soldiers to get supplies from the ships at Lakhau, but he was forestalled by the guerrilla tactics adopted by the Assamese. The latter conducted a successful attack on the outpost at Gajpur and the soldiers there were all killed. More and more Mir Jumla found it difficult to maintain his outposts and these had to be withdrawn to Garhgaon and Mathurapur. Only these two places remained in his hands; the rest of the country was re-occupied by the Ahoms; Jaydhwaj Singha himself could return from Charai-khorong and set up camp close to his capital.⁽³⁰⁾

The entire monsoon period of Mughal occupation of Upper Assam was a terrible phase of suffering and misery. "The Assamese now completely closed all the roads and recovered the whole land east of Lakhau except Garhgaon

and Mathurapur. Mir Jumla had to withdraw all *thanas* in stages. So close was the isolation of these two places that no help, no grain or necessities could come from outside. The Mughals lost all hope of return. Interception of news was so complete that their relations in Hindustan, hearing nothing of them, performed their funeral rites.”⁽³¹⁾

Writing about this the Mughal historian Shiabuddin Talish stated: “A similar case had never happened before in the history of Delhi. Here were 12,000 horses and numerous infantry locked in for six months, prevented by the rains from continuing operations, yet scarcely attacked by the enemies that surround them. Nor did during this time provisions arrive. The Amirs turned their eyes longingly to Delhi and the soldiers yearned for their wives and children..... The soldiers were forced to eat the flesh of horses and camels and anything of that sort they could find.”⁽³²⁾

Overwhelmed by rain, slush, floods, fever and dysentery, there was genuine cause to fear that Mir Jumla's starving forces would rebel against their generals; the Commander-in-Chief gave up his plans of further conquest and decided to leave the Ahom realm along with his troops. Notwithstanding the Mughal's plight the Assamese had been making overtures for a treaty — he now sent emissaries to inform them that given honourable terms he was willing to hand over the kingdom back to the Ahom king. Meanwhile, with improvement of the weather, communication could be restored and Ibn Hussain who had been left in charge of the Mughal fleet even counter-attacked the Assamese. Also, large quantities of fresh supplies could be sent from the ships to Garhgaon and the soldiers there soon recovered their morale. The land having dried up, the Mughals could operate their cavalry; the

change in circumstances coerced Jaydhwaj Singha to escape once more to Namrup, while it made Atan Buragohain become anxious to explore possibilities of a treaty with the Mughals so that they would leave Garhgaon and go back to Lower Assam.

“But, by December, 1662 the situation had come to such a pass that both sides desired peace. The Assamese, the king and the people alike, felt the deepest pangs of humiliation at the occupation of the heart of their homeland, nay even the capital of the heavenly king, which could hardly be assuaged by their occasional and infructuous harassing activities, which failed to undermine the strength of the Mughals. In Ahom diplomatic usage no price was too high to achieve the freedom of their land from foreign aggression. A treaty made under duress, even if most humiliating, was preferable to the physical presence of a foreigner, for it could conveniently be scrapped with a change of situation. So the Assamese started peace proposals with offers of money and gold.”⁽³³⁾

On his side, Mir Jumla became seriously ill and could travel only in a palanquin. His Generals informed him about the unwillingness of the soldiers to spend another rainy season in the accursed land. “As regards the Mughals, Mir Jumla, who had so vehemently refused to relent, gradually became inclined to peace, partly because of the grim realities of the situation in Assam and partly due to Dilir Khan’s intercessions. His position was most unenviable. He could conquer the country but could neither establish a settled Government nor win over the people. His sole mainstay was the army. But the news of the outbreak of a famine in Bengal and the consequent reduction of rations of the Mughal *nawwara* at Lakhau so alarmed the army that it was on the verge of mutiny. Weighed down by disease,

worried about his own shattered constitution, disconcerted by disaffection in the army, calculating the possible evil effects of rejecting the peace offer, and desirous of releasing all Mussalman prisoners of war, Mir Jumla reluctantly agreed to conclude peace. A speedy conclusion of peace and prompt return, he felt to be 'proper and best' for all. Still he put a bold face on his retreat, showing that he could still advance to Tipam, where the preliminaries of peace would be made. Matters were precipitated by the news of the recovery of Kochbehar by Pran Narayan."⁽³⁴⁾

He therefore, through his emissary, spelled out the conditions by which he would agree to hand over Upper Assam to the Ahom monarch. Atan Buragohain, concluding that any prolonging of the hostilities would be disastrous for his motherland, grasped the offer and himself handled the negotiations to arrive at a treaty. Thus, on 23rd January, 1663, the treaty of Ghilajharighat was signed between the Assamese and the Mughals.

All the conditions laid down by Mir Jumla were acceded to. Jaydhwaj Singha had to immediately pay twenty thousand *tolas* of gold, one hundred and twenty thousand *tolas* of silver and forty elephants. Within a year another three hundred *tolas* of silver and ninety elephants were to be given and twenty elephants were to be supplied annually.

In exchange Mir Jumla and his forces would withdraw to Gauhati, though the Ahoms would have to cede to the Delhi Emperor the land west of the River Bharali on the north and River Kalang on the south. The condition of the annual tribute of twenty elephants was inserted to drive home the point that the Ahom monarch was a vassal of the Emperor of Delhi. To ensure that the conditions of the treaty were fully implemented, the Mughals took with them six sons of the chief nobles as hostages, including Ramrai,

a nephew of the Buragohain, Dhala Gohain, son of the Bargohain, Langi Gohain, son of the Barpatragohain, and Maupia, son of the Rajmantri Phukan.

The Ahom king had to send his one and only daughter to the imperial harem at Delhi, and all family members of the Assamese collaborator of the Mughals, Baduli Phukan, as also all Mughal prisoners, had to be handed over. (35)The princess who was offered to the imperial harem was six-year-old Ramani Gabharu, the daughter of Jaydhwaj Singha by his younger consort Pakhari Gabharu, daughter of Momai Tamuli Barbarua. Ramani was later married off to Sultan Mohammad Azam, the third son of Emperor Aurangzeb, on May 2, 1668, with a dowry of 1,80,000 rupees, when her name was changed to Rahmat Banu Begum. (36)The Ahom king had also to send the daughter of the Tipam Raja, named Mohini Aideu, to Delhi. The terms of the Ghilajharighat treaty are reported both in the Persian and Assamese sources. There is much confusion, however, due to inconsistency and exaggeration, between the various sources. The name of the princess, for example, is also given as Nangcheng or Namseng Gabharoo.

“The Mughal General took with him 12, 000 Assamese followers and captives. Those who accompanied Mir Jumla on their own accord included Baduli Phukan, Maupia, Hari Dekha's son, Uddhav Duaria, Dangdhara, and Raghu Kath's son Manohar Kakati. The following Assamese officers were taken as captives by the Mughals; Luthuri Chetia Rajkhowa, Dayangia Bargohain Rajkhowa, Laluk Gohain and Dighala Rajkhowa. Jaydhwaj Singha protested against the action of the Mughal General which was avowedly in contravention of the terms of the treaty of Ghilajharighat.”⁽³⁷⁾

Mir Jumla's war-weary troops headed for Gauhati on 25th January, 1663, with little food to carry back with them. Shiabuddin Talish recorded that the soldiers had to subsist on grass and water for much of the way. The Ahom tactic of cutting off supplies also involved the scorched-earth technique whereby villages on the route were summarily removed and all cultivation destroyed. Somehow they managed to reach Gauhati where finally they found succour and safety.

"Throughout this long and arduous journey through Assam and Kamrup, the Mughals had never to face any treacherous attack from the Assamese..... It must be said to the credit of the latter that they never attacked or harassed the retreating army. Mir Jumla's reporter, Talish, never alludes to the grave dangers mentioned by European writers (e.g. Bernier, Manucci and Glanius) on the General's return march, except once in the wilderness of Kajali, but that was only about shortage of food." (38)

However, Mir Jumla himself fell gravely ill. He could not ride on elephant-back and had to be carried on a *palki* from Garhgaon to Lakhau and thence by ship to Kaliabar and then again by *palki*. At Garhgaon he had been suffering from chest-pain and asthma, but his personal doctors were unable to diagnose what exactly was the cause of the ailment and had tried various medications without visible alleviation. Having installed Rashid Khan as Faujadar of Gauhati and Kamrup, with 500 men and 40 warships, Muhammad Khalil Bakhshi and Muhammad Beg as Thanadar under Rashid, and leaving the Assamese prisoners with them, Mir Jumla proceeded for Dhaka, but his condition worsened and he died just before his ship reached there, on March 30, 1663. Thus, perversely, Aurangzeb's secret wish was fulfilled and the life of this powerful noble

who once possessed the famous Kohinoor diamond which he gifted to Emperor Shah Jahan came to an inglorious end!
(39)

There is little doubt that Mir Jumla's ill-fated expedition to Assam left a deep impression on the minds of the Mughals as can be seen in description of a contemporary historian named Muhammad Kazim, author of the *Alamgirnamah* — "The Rajas of Assam have never bowed the head of submission and obedience, nor have they paid tributes or revenue to the most powerful monarch, but they have curbed the ambition and checked the conquests of the most victorious princes of Hindustan. The solution of a war against them has baffled the penetration of heroes who have been styled conquerors of the world." (40)



Shiabuddin Talish, the Mughal chronicler, sketched a detailed profile of Assam. No doubt his perspective was coloured by his overt antipathy towards the Assamese as also the taunting tone he occasionally assumed which grated against the needs of objectivity so necessary for a historian. Yet his sketch, despite its drawbacks, provides an interesting insight into the region and its people during the 17th century. "Assam is a wild and dreadful country," he wrote, "abounding in danger. It lies north-east of the province of Bengal. The river Brahmaputra flows through it from the east towards the west. The length of Assam from west to east, Gauhati to Sadiya, is about 200 Kos: its breadth, north to south, from the hills of the Garos, Miris, Mishmis, Daflahs and Landahs to those of the Naga tribes is seven or eight days' journey at a guess..... Its southern mountains touch lengthwise the hilly region of Khasia, Kachhar and

Gonasher and breadth wise the hills inhabited by the Naga tribes. The land on the north bank of the Brahmaputra is called *Uttarkol*, and on the southern bank *Dakhinkol*. *Uttarkol* stretches from Gauhati to the home of the Miri and Mishmi tribes and *Dakhinkol* from the kingdom of the Nak-Kati-Rani to the village of Sadiya..... From Kaliabar to Garhgaon houses and orchards full of fruit trees stretch in an unbroken line; and on both sides of the road, shady bamboo groves raise their heads to the sky. Many varieties of sweet scented wild and garden flowers bloom here and from the rear of the bamboo groves up to the foot of the hills there are cultivated fields and gardens. From Lakhugarh to Garhgaon also there are roads, houses and farms in the same style; and a lofty and wide embanked road has been constructed up to Garhgaon for traffic.

"In this country they make the surface of fields and gardens so level that the eye cannot find the least elevation in it up to the extreme horizon. *Uttarkol* has greater abundance of population and cultivation, but as there are more inaccessible strongholds and defensible central places in *Dakhinkol*, the kings of Assam have fixed their abode in the latter.

"The climate on the parts on the banks of the Brahmaputra suits natives and strangers alike. But at a distance from the river, though the climate agrees with the natives, it is rank poison to foreigners. It rains for eight months in the year and even the four months of winter are not free from rain. In the cold weather the diseases of cold and moisture affect foreigners with greater severity than natives, while in summer excessive secretion of bile grasps foreigners more violently than natives. The people of this country are free from certain fatal and loathsome diseases such as leprosy, white leprosy, elephantiasis, coetaneous

eruptions, goitre and hydrocele which prevail in Bengal. They are also immune from many other lingering maladies. The air and water of its hills are like the destructive Simoom and deadly poison to its natives and strangers alike. Its plains being by reason of their being girth about by hills, tend to breed melancholy and fear.

“The trees of its hills and plains are exceedingly tall, thick and strong. Its streams are deep and wide and both those that contain pools and those that do not are beyond the range of numbering. Many kinds of odorous fruits and herbs of Bengal and Hindustan grow in Assam. We saw here certain varieties of flowers and fruits, both wild and cultivated, which are not to be met with elsewhere in the whole of India. The coconut and neem trees are rare; but pepper, spikenard and many species of lemon are abundant. Mangoes are full of worms, but plentiful, sweet and free from fibre, though yielding scanty juice. Its pineapples are very large, delicious to taste, and rich in juice. Sugarcane is of the black, red and white varieties and very sweet, but so hard as to break one’s teeth; ginger is juicy..... The chief crop of the country is rice but the thin and long varieties of the grain are rare. Wheat, barley and lentils are not grown. The soil is fertile; whatever they sow or plant grows well. Salt is very dear and difficult to procure. It is found in the skirts of certain hills, but is very bitter and pungent. Some of the people of this country cut the bananas to pieces, dry them in the sun and burn them. Then they put the ashes on a piece of fine linen which they tie to four rods fixed in the ground, place a pot underneath and gradually sprinkle water on the cloth; and they use the drippings which are extremely brackish and bitter as a substitute for salt.

“Cocks, waterfowl, geese, goats, castrated goats and game-cocks are large, plentiful and delicious. Most of the

game-cocks of the country have been found to be so far above the disgrace of taking to flight that if a weak one encounters a stronger one it fights obstinately till its head is broken and its brain strewn about, and it dies, but it never turns its face away from its antagonist nor shows its back to its enemy. Large, high-spirited and well-proportioned elephants abound in the hills and jungles. The deer, elk, nilgai, fighting ram and partridge is plentiful.

"Gold is washed from the sand of the Brahmaputra. Ten to twelve thousand Assamese are engaged in this employment, and they pay to the Raja's Government one *tola* of gold per head per year. But this gold is of a low standard of purity; a *tola* of it fetches only eight or nine rupees. It is said that gold can be procured from the sand at all places on the bank of the Brahmaputra; but the only people who know how to gather it are those Assamese. The currency of the kingdom consists of cowries and rupees and gold coins stamped with the stamp of the Raja. Copper coins are not current. The musk deer and elephants are found in the hills inhabited by the Miri and Mishmi tribes, which lie to the east of Assam on the *Uttarkol* side at a distance of 11 days' journey from Garhgaon. Silver, copper and tin are also obtained in the hills of the same tribes..... The aloe wood which grows in the hills of Namrup, Sadiya and Lakhugarh, is heavy, coloured and scented.

"If this country were administered like the imperial dominions, it is very likely that forty to forty-five lakhs of rupees would be collected from the revenue paid by the *rai-yats*, the price of elephants caught in the jungles and other sources. It is not the custom here to take any land tax from the cultivators; but in every house one man out of three has to render service to the Raja, and if there is any delay in doing what he orders, not other than

death is inflicted. Hence the most complete obedience is rendered by the people to the bidding of their Raja.

“In all past ages no foreign king could lay the hand of conquest on the skirt of this country, and no foreigner could treat it with the foot of invasion. Narrow are the gates by which outsiders can enter or issue from this country and lame are the feet on which its natives can go to other countries. Their kings neither allow foreigners to enter their land, nor permit any of their own subjects to go out of it. Formerly once a year, by the order of the Raja, a party used to go for trade to their frontier near Gauhati; they gave gold, musk, aloe wood, pepper, spikenard and silk cloth in exchange for salt, saltpetre, sulphur and certain other products of India which the people of Gauhati used to take thither. In short every army that entered this country made its exit from the realm of life; every caravan that set foot on this land deposited its baggage of residence in the halting place of death. In former times whenever an army turned towards this country for raid and conquest, as soon as it reached the frontier, the wretches made night attacks on it. If success did not dawn on the night of their enterprise, they used to drive away to the hills the peasantry along the route of invasion, leaving not a man to inhabit a house or kindle a fire in that tract. The invaders neglecting caution and watchfulness reached the centre of the country after passing unobstructed roads full of danger, raging torrents and frightful valleys covered with deadly forests. And by reason of the distance the winter expired on the way and the rainy season began. The wretches, descending from the hilltops like a flood, invested the army on all sides.....if two drops of rain fall in this moist land, movement becomes impossible. So that imprudent army on being besieged, has no power left to confront and repel the enemy and grows

weaker through failure to procure supplies of food and is exterminated or taken prisoner. It is said that certain inhabitants of this country who bear the name of Muhamaddans are descended from the captured soldiers of that army. As no one who entered this country ever returned and the manners of its natives were never made known to outsiders, the people of Hindustan used to call the inhabitants of Assam sorcerers and magicians and consider them as standing outside the human species. They say that whoever enters this country is overcome by charms and never comes out of it.

"The Rajas of this country have always been self-confident and proud by reason of the large number of their followers and attendants and the abundance of their property, treasure and armed force; and they have always maintained vast bodies of fighting men and mountain-like ferocious looking elephants. The present king Jaydhwaj is surnamed Swargi Raja. The false belief of this fool is that one of his ancestors who ruled over heaven descended from thence by means of a golden ladder and undertook to administer this country; and as he found the land pleasant he did not go back to heaven. In short, this insane fellow is more sunk in conceit and pride and more addicted to shedding blood and destroying lives than his ancestors. For a slight fault he would extirpate a whole family; on the least suspicion he would kill a whole generation. As his wives bring forth daughters only and his successor in the kingdom will be no other than Infamy, he has not left any male child among the grandchildren of his grandparents. Although he is attached to the Hindu religion, yet he considers himself to be one of the great incarnations of the Creator; he does not bow his head down in worship of any idol.

“And all the people of this country, not placing their necks in the yoke of any faith, eat whatever they get from hand of any men, regardless of his caste, and undertake every kind of labour that appears proper to their defective sights. They do not abstain from eating food cooked by Muslims and non-Muslims, and partake of every kind of meat, whether of dead or slaughtered animals, except human flesh. It is not their custom to eat *ghi*, so that if any article even savours of *ghi* they will not eat it. Their language differs entirely from that of all the peoples of eastern India. Strength and heroism are apparent in the people of this country; they are able to undertake hard tasks; all of them are warlike and bloodthirsty, fearless in slaying and being slain, unrivalled in cruelty, treachery and rudeness unique in the world of deception, lying and breach of faith. The persons of their women are marked by beauty and delicacy of features, blackness and length of hair, softness of body, fairness of complexion and loveliness of hands and feet. From a distance their general appearance looks perfectly beautiful, but disfigured by the absence of proportion of limbs. When, however, they are looked close at hand, they are found to be far from beautiful. The wives of the Rajas and peasants alike never veil their faces before anybody and they move about in the market places with bare heads.

“Few of the men have two wives only; most have four or five, and they mutually exchange their wives, or buy or sell them. Adoration among this people takes the form of kneeling down. The peasants who go to the Raja, or the nobles who have audience of him, after bending both the knees, sit down in a kneeling posture, keeping both eyes fixed on the ground. They shave their hair, beard and moustaches. If any of the natives acts contrary to this

practice in the least particular, they say that he has adopted the manners of the Bengalis and they cut the head off.

"Asses, camels and horses are rare and difficult to procure in this country. As affinity of species is the cause of fellowship, these timid asses, viz., the Assamese, express a great desire to see and keep donkeys, and by reason of their own asinine nature, buy them at high prices; and they are eager beyond limit to look at that marvel of creation, the camel. They are greatly frightened by horses, and if they catch one, they hamstring it. If a single trooper charges a hundred well-armed Assamese, they all throw down their arms and run away, and if they cannot flee, they put their hands up to be chained as prisoners. But if one of them encounters ten Mussalman infantrymen, he fearlessly tries to slay them and succeeds in defeating them. The Assamese consider the sale of an elephant as the most disgraceful of acts and never commits it.

"The Raja and Phukans ride on *sinhasans* and the chiefs and rich men in *dulis*, which are constructed with poles and planks in a ridiculous fashion. The poles of *sinhasans* and *dulis* are curved out of wood. They make chairs of wood in the style of stools, and strap them to the backs of elephants instead of covered litters and *howdahs*. It is not their custom to tie turbans round their heads, to wear coats, trousers or shoes or to sleep in bedsteads. They only wrap a piece of fine linen round the head, and a waistband around the middle, and place a *chaddar* on the shoulders. Some of their rich men in winter put on a half-coat like a jacket. Those who can afford it sleep on a plank, which serves as a bedstead. They chew large quantities of betel leaves with unripe areca nuts. Flowered silk, velvet, tat-band and other kinds of silk stuff are excellently woven here. They make very nice and beautiful chairs, chests, thrones

and chairs, all carved out of one piece of wood. Among the property of the Raja, some thrones were found, each made of one piece of wood and nearly two cubits broad and having legs cut out of the same piece and not joined to it.

“They build war boats like the *kosahs* of Bengal and call them *bacharis*. There are no other differences between the two than this that the prow and stern of the *kosah* have two projecting horns, while those of the *bachari* consist of only one levelled plank; and as, aiming solely at strength, they build these boats with the heart-wood of timber, they are slower than *kosahs*. So numerous are the boats, large and small, in this country that one occasion the news-writer of Gauhati reported in the month of Ramzan that up to the date of his writing 32,000 *bachari* and *kosah* boats had reached that place or passed it. The number of boats that conveyed the imperial army and those inhabitants of Assam who accompanied the Nawab (Mir Jumla) on his return probably exceeded the number mentioned by the news-writer. Probably half of these were manned by Assamese. They build most of their boats of chambal wood; and such vessels, however heavily they may be loaded, on being swamped do not sink in the water.

“They cast excellent matchlocks and *bachadar* artillery, and show great skill in this craft. They make first-rate gunpowder, of which they procure the material from imperial dominions. In the whole of Assam there is no building of brick, stone or mud, with the exception of the gates of Garhgaon and a few temples. Rich and poor alike construct their houses with wood, bamboo and straw. The original inhabitants of this country are of two races — the Assamese or the Kolita. In all things the latter are superior

to the former; but in performing difficult tasks and making a firm stand in battle, the opposite is the case.

"Six or seven thousand Assamese always stand guard round the abode and bedroom of the Raja, and these are called *Chaudangs*. They are devoted and trusted servants of the Raja and they are his executioners. The weapons of war are matchlocks, cannons, arrows with and without iron heads, short swords, spears and long crossbows. In times of war all the inhabitants of the kingdom have to go to battle, whether they wish it or not; like jackals they set up a concerted howl, all at the same time, and deliver a great assault. These jackal-hearted people imagine that by means of such shouts they would frighten the lions of forest of battle and tigers of the plains of fight. A very small number of their soldiers often checkmate thousands in battle. But those of their warriors and heroes who attack the enemy with swords and arrows and boldly pierce the enemy's ranks, belong to the race of genuine Assamese, and these probably do not number more than 20,000 men. They mostly engage in battle and night attacks on a Tuesday which they consider an auspicious day. The common people either fight and are defeated, or flee without fighting, fixing in their mind's eye the purport of the verse: 'Those who had fear gained safety, while the fearless were destroyed,' they throw away all their arms and escape.

"The common people bury their dead with some of the property of the deceased, placing the head towards the east and the feet towards the west. The chiefs build vaults for their dead, and place therein the wives and servants of the deceased, after killing them, together with necessary articles for a few years, including various kinds of gold and silver vessels, carpets, cloths and foodstuffs. They cover the head of the dead very strongly with ~~stamped~~ poles, and

bury in the vault a lamp with plenty of oil and one living lamp attendant to remain engaged in the work of trimming the lamp. From the ten vaults which were opened (by the Mughals) property worth nearly ninety thousand rupees was recovered. ⁽⁴¹⁾ One of the marvels was that from the vaults of one of the queens of this country who had been buried eighty years ago, a gold betel casket was taken, within which the betel leaf was still green. The author did not see this casket.

“As for the Mussalmans who had been taken prisoners at former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendants act exactly in the manner of the Assamese and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are more inclined towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims. The Muhammadans who had come from Islamic lands engaged in the performance of prayer and fasting, but were forbidden to chant the call to prayer or publicly recite the ‘word of God.’

“The city of Garhgaon has four gates of stone set in mud, from each of which to the Raja’s palace, for a distance of three *kos*, an extremely strong, high and wide embankment has been constructed for the passage of men. Around the city, in the place of a wall, there is an encompassing bamboo plantation running continuously, two *kos* or more in width. But in the city the habitations are not regularly laid out..... Near the Raja’s palace, on both banks of the Dikhow River, the houses are numerous and there is a narrow bazaar road. The only traders who sit in the bazaar are betel-leaf sellers. It is not their practice to buy and sell articles of food in the market place. The inhabitants store in their houses one year’s supply of food of all kinds, and are under no necessity to buy or sell any eatable.

"In short the village of Garhgaon appeared to us to be circular, wide and aggregation of villages. Round the Raja's house an embankment has been made and strong bamboos have been planted on it close together to serve as a wall. Round it a moat has been dug which is deeper than a man's height in most places and is always full of water. The enclosure is one *kos* and fourteen chains in circumference. Inside it high and spacious thatched houses have been built.

"The Raja's audience hall, called *solang*, is 120 cubits long and 30 cubits broad, measured on the inside. It stands on 66 pillars, each of them about four cubits round. They have smoothed these pillars so well, that at first sight they seemed to have been turned on a lathe. Though the people pretended to have the art of turning on lathe, yet reason refuses to believe it. My pen fails to describe in detail the other arts and rare inventions employed in decorating the woodwork of this palace. Probably nowhere else in the world can wooden houses be built with such decorations and figure carvings as by the people of this country. The sides of this palace have been partitioned into wooden lattices of various designs carved in relief and adorned, both within and without, with mirrors of brass, polished so finely that when the sunbeams fall on them, the eye is dazzled by the flashing back of light. This mansion was completed by 12,000 men working for one year. At the end of this palace, on four pillars facing each other, rings have been fixed, nine rings on each pillar. Whenever the Raja wished to live in this house, a throne was placed between the four pillars, and nine canopies, each of a different stuff, were fastened to the rings above the throne. The Raja sat on the throne under the canopies; the drummers beat their drums and *dands*. The *dand* is a circular, flat instrument of brass like our gongs. When the Raja holds court or rides out, or the

nobles set out for the places to which they have been newly appointed, the drums and *dands* are beaten. As for the many other wooden mansions, carved, decorated, strong, broad and long, which were inside the palace enclosure, their elegance and peculiar features can better be seen than described. But may not even an infidel be fated to behold these houses unless this country is annexed to the Imperial dominions, so that he might not be involved in the calamities that overwhelmed us.

“Outside the enclosure of the palace, a perfectly neat and pure mansion has been built for the residence of the Raja, and the nobles have built very nice and strong houses near the royal palace. The Barphukan, who was the Raja’s son-in-law, had laid out an extremely elegant and fresh garden round a very pure and sweet tank within the grounds of his mansion. Truly it was a pleasant spot and a heart-ravishing and pure abode. Owing to the excess of damp, it is not the custom in this country to make the courtyards of houses on the surface of the ground; but they build their houses on platforms resting on wooden pillars.....” (42)



“The whirlwind invasion of Mir Jumla totally disordered Assam, leaving destruction, plunder and pestilence in its trail. Terribly depleted were manpower, military and economic resources. Villages were depopulated as inhabitants left their hearths and homes for security in hills and forests. The ranks of the army were thinned considerably by war, desertion and disease. The fortifications were demolished. The arsenals became empty. The treasury was sucked dry by war expenses and war indemnity. But Assam’s recovery from such devastation was

not only complete but quickly achieved. Within a brief span of five years she was able to measure swords with her victor and wrest Gauhati from him.”⁽⁴³⁾

The moment the Mughals departed, Jaydhwaj Singha reclaimed his throne, but being advised by the priests not to go to Garhgaon because the place had been defiled by the occupation of the Mughal, he made Bakata his temporary capital. Being of a vindictive nature the Ahom king wanted to severely punish some of the nobles for negligence of duty, but his officers including Atan Buragohain and Khamun Rajmantri Phukan advised against too harsh punishments since it might serve to demoralize the nobility even further. The king, recognizing the wisdom in the advice, contented himself by inflicting relatively light punishment such as whipping, or dismissal from their posts, on those whom he deemed to be culpable. The senior-most among the culprits, Barukial Langi Bargohain, who had failed to send reinforcement to the army on the south bank was beaten by the king himself with the blunt edge of his sword.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The need of the hour, according to his trusted officers, was to take immediate measures to restore the morale of the ordinary people, which had been undermined by dissensions in the top echelons of the leadership, as also defections of officers, such as the brothers Baduli Phukan and Maupia Phukan, who not only helped the Mughals, but also left Assam along with their families with Mir Jumla. Another offender was Chegmun Barphukan, the brother of Rajmantri Phukan, who had refrained from putting up a fight against the invading Mughals because a non-Ahom official had been appointed as the Commander of the Lower Assam army. To compound his guilt, the Barphukan even assisted the Mughals by providing them with guides to

effectively pierce Ahom defences. Such gross misdemeanours deserved execution, but the Barphukan made things simpler by killing himself.

The prolonged anarchy in the country had almost totally destroyed the *khel* system whereby the ordinary soldiers and workers, the *paiks*, had been systematically organized, mainly due to the flight and dispersal of the population in the face of the advancing Mughals. During the occupation of Garhgaon by Mir Jumla and his forces, because of the distinct possibility that the rule of the Ahoms had come to an end and from then on another all-India power would rule over the land, the political and moral authority of the Ahom Swargadeo had been grievously diminished among his subjects, with Jaydhvaj Singha being constantly referred to by them by the derogatory appellation of the Bhaganiyaking. The demoralization amongst the subjects could be gauged by the fact that no less than 12,000 Assamese followers including some captives had gone away with Mir Jumla when he left Assam.

The Buragohain took it upon himself to tour the entire realm under the control of the Ahoms, persuading fugitives to return to their original villages and resume their earlier occupations. The return to normalcy for most of them resulted in boosting their morale and invigorating their lost feeling of nationalistic pride. Along with restoration of the society's economic equilibrium, the Buragohain also undertook a thorough overhaul of the higher echelons of the administration, appointing men of calibre to the various posts.

Even during his period of exile at Namrup Jaydhvaj Singha had been sending secret emissaries to former local allies asking for their assistance if an occasion to hit back at the Mughal aggressors was to arise in the future. Now, after his return to Bakota, he renewed contact with them.

Emissaries were dispatched with letters to the Rajas of Koch Behar, Jayantia and Cachar asking if they would be a part of an anti-Mughall confederacy in Eastern India. They sent back reassuringly positive replies assuring of their assistance if hostilities were resumed.

During his exile Jaydhwaj Singha had exchanged correspondence with the Koch king Pranalarayan. In response to a missive from the latter asking for his current status, the former had written: "My soldiers had fought at Samdhara for seven days. As in your case, my own men went over to the side of the enemy, and made it possible for them to enter the fortification at Samdhara. My army was dispersed in the subsequent engagements, and the Mughals occupied my capital at Garhgaon. Fighting continued in many places and the Mughals were on the point of retreat. But our inveterate enemy Baduli went over to the Mughals and induced them to return. Having seen no other way I took shelter in the hills. I then arranged the withdrawal of the Mughal army from Assam in the interest of the cows and the Brahmins as well as the people of the country." (45)

To this Pranalarayan had replied: "I lost my kingdom and so you lost yours. As we did not harbour evil intentions towards each other both of us have now regained our kingdoms. You should not feel distressed at having temporarily lost your dominion, as Ramachandra, Suratha and Yudhisthira could not escape similar calamities. But their prestige has not been affected as they reacquired their territories by dint of their own exertions. Our prestige would be lowered only if we remain inactive in the matter."

Jaydhwaj Singha's reply reflected his growing self-confidence: "Even when the sun is once eclipsed, does it not make its reappearance again? We are making

preparations according to our might, and I hope you are also doing the same. When fire and wind act in unison they take no time in burning the trees and grasses. So we can also defeat and destroy the enemy if we establish an effective alliance between us two.” (46)

The Jayantia Raja Jasmatta Rai, who had sent two emissaries to the Ahom king during the Mughal invasion but who were captured by Mir Jumla's troops before they could make contact, wrote after Jaydhwaj Singha's return to Bakota: “Jayantia and Garhgaon are not separate and divisible. At your discomfiture at the hands of the Mughals I am feeling as if my own country has been harassed and humiliated by the enemy. What has happened cannot be undone. Henceforward we should attempt strengthen our bond of friendship. The Mughals have simply invaded your country; they have not been able to hold it under their domination permanently. The land and the people are all intact, as well as your august self. Measures now should be concerted to organise a more effective cooperation between ourselves so that we may wreak vengeance upon the Mughals.” (47)

Raja Manik Singha of Nartiang, a vassal State of the Jayantias, wrote: “The loss of two men (in reference to the two captured emissaries) is nothing. We would not have been sorry even if we had lost ten or twenty thousand men for your sake. We are aggrieved that we could not render you any assistance with our men. We have no greater friend than yourself, and we know that your sentiments are not dissimilar. Distance becomes prosperity if the hearts of the two parties are pure and sincere, as you know from the saying in Sanskrit, *he who is attached to one does not recognise any distance*. Jayantia and Garhgaon are not two different places. What pains me most is that I was living in

peace and comfort while your country was being overrun by the Mughals. It will be my life's regret that I had no opportunity to order ten or twenty thousand of my stalwarts to run to your aid in your emergency. The Mughals have done according to their strength and might. They should get retribution for the devastation they have caused. The humiliation would be blotted out only on the day we shall be able to extirpate our foe." (48)

The role such correspondence and expressions of support played in lifting up the spirits of the Ahom king and his nobles was remarkable, and they took up the rehabilitation and restoration measures with renewed vigour. It will be also seen that, although not all the professions of friendship and offer to help translated into actuality, some of the allies, such as the Raja of Rani, were to provide invaluable assistance in the course of events of the future.

No one knew better of the demoralization which had taken place in the Ahom kingdom than that great statesman-warrior Atan Buragohain, who now worked day and night to instil the spirit of nationalism and fidelity to the royal throne into the nobles and officers, reminding them constantly of their glorious heritage, and the tradition and ideals of the Shan race, yet at the same time taking care to weed out unacceptable individuals and place more acceptable ones in important positions. Mir Jumla's invasion had devastated the once self-sufficient land, food was in short supply while the royal coffers were empty. The bleakness of the situation was exacerbated by the exorbitant tribute that had to be repaid to the Mughals as war indemnity.

The Buragohain adopted all kinds of subterfuge to ensure that the pace of payment of the tribute was slowed

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down without raising suspicions in the mind of the Mughal Faujadar Rashid Khan who might communicate these to his master at Delhi. The Assamese had paid a major chunk of the war indemnity at Garhgaon itself in the presence of Mir Jumla during the last few days of the latter's stay. They took their time in repaying the balance in instalments, all the while dealing with the Mughal complaints of tardiness by politely but firmly replying that they were trying their best to fulfil their obligations. Their problems were many; after all they were trying to raise money in a land which had been ravaged by the Mughals themselves! It was also difficult to catch elephants during the rainy season and getting them trained took a great deal of time! The Mughals had no other option but to accept such explanations and excuses; when, occasionally, those seemed to be somewhat weak to the most credulous ears, they pointed out to the presence of hostages confined in Gauhati, asking as to whether it was possible to wilfully desist from paying the war indemnity, thereby risking the lives of the sons of four Ahom nobles? ⁽⁴⁹⁾

Simultaneously, they persisted in the Herculean endeavour to enthuse the farmers into opening up more arable land and doubling their agricultural output. Sources of revenue, such as exploiting rivers for gold, were sought for with renewed vigour. The army was restructured, additional officers and men were recruited, and training imparted so that it would become the epitome of efficiency, with the king and the Buragohain personally supervising the training sessions and manoeuvres. The armament factories were made to operate day and night, production of guns and swords were quadrupled, with new weapons being devised by experts. However, great secrecy was maintained in carrying out these measures so that no hint

of it travelled to foreign ears; for instance, the smithies producing armaments were concealed only within the palace enclosures!

All the above activities, however, were suddenly interrupted by the death of Jaydhvaj Singha, whose health had suffered because of travails he had undergone. In November, 1663, he was afflicted by a serious disease, and died within a matter of days.

Despite having had to flee his capital at Garhgaon due to adverse developments, and thereby being eternally branded as the Bhaganiya Raja, Jaydhvaj Singha at heart was a patriotic individual, as revealed in his attempt to rejuvenate his land the moment the Mughals left his realm, and make preparations to wrest back seized territories.

As recorded in the *buranjis*, when he lay on his death-bed at Bakota, he expressed his desire to have a final glimpse of his beloved capital Garhgaon where he had lived as the monarch for 15 years. Atan and his colleagues tried to dissuade him because Garhgaon lay deserted and in ruins, and it was feared that Mir Jumla's troops, before their departure, may have booby-trapped the city. The Deodhai and Brahmin priests, as also the court astrologers, joined in the dissuading chorus, but the king remained determined. He was carried to the city and placed at the gate; he peeped through it and, sighting what Garhgaon had been reduced to, wept and fainted, and had to be removed in a prostrate condition back to Bakota.

Prior to his demise he is reported to have summoned his Ministers and spoken to them: "My condition is grave and serious," he said. "You should be of one mind and purpose, and direct your efforts to restoring your devastated country to prosperity and peace. Appoint someone as your paramount Lord and protect the people as is the traditions

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of the land. It should be your earnest endeavour to extract from the nation's bosom the spear of humiliation fixed upon it by our enemy the Mughals." (50)



It was Assam's good fortune that the king who immediately succeeded him, Supungmung or Chakradhwaj Singha, was an enterprising individual, full of nationalistic zeal, and determined to wrest Lower Assam back from the Mughals. The *buranjis* differ as to his exact relationship to the diseased king. Some have it that he was his brother; others say that he was a cousin, while others state that he was the grandson. Some assert that Jaydhwaj Singha, on his deathbed, against his chief queen's wishes, himself named Chakradhwaj Singha, who had earlier been the Saring Raja, and had shown enormous gallantry in the campaign against Mir Jumla, as the next occupant of the Ahom throne. No less an individual than Khamun Rajmantri Phukan challenged the new king's authority, but was ward off by the *patra-mantris* led by Atan Buragohain.

Apparently, the Buragohain had not yet fully succeeded in quelling the dissent, rivalries and discord prevalent amongst the nobles, caused by a relatively weak monarch and the upheaval to the Ahom administrative system due to the Mir Jumla episode, for these raised their ugly hoods as soon as Jaydhwaj Singha expired, when a scramble for the throne, contradicting the dead king's wishes, ensued. The noble behind this attempt was none other than Khamun Rajmantri Phukan and his relatives. Khamun, and his two brothers, Chegmun and Lechai, had risen in the Ahom administrative hierarchy mainly due to their father, Baghchowal Haladhithenga Neog Gohain, having been an

eminent soldier and administrator. Baghchowal had become the Barphukan during the reign of Pratap Singha, and died at Amrajuri near Kamakhya while fighting the Mughals. His eldest son, Chengmun, as already mentioned, was the Barphukan at Kaliabor; the youngest, Lechai, held the office of Hatimuria Phukan; and the second, Khamun, became the Naobaicha Phukan with the rank of Rajmantri.

The closeness of Khamun to the royal household can be gauged by the fact that his two daughters were married to Jaydhwaj Singha. The elder sister had earlier been married to a member of the Buragohain's family, but the king, infatuated by her beauty, took her away from her husband and made her his wife, investing upon her the title of Parvatiya Kuonri. Jaydhwaj Singha adopted her son by the earlier marriage, Langichang Gohain, also known as Kalia Gohain, and made him reside in the palace. When the king was on his death-bed, the Parvatiya Kuonri along with her younger sister Kusumi Barkuonri tried to convince him that Kalia Gohain was best suited to succeed him. But Jaydhwaj Singha demurred because Kalia did not have royal blood in him and was a commoner. As stated earlier, he preferred Chakara the Saring Raja, who at that time was in the office of a Hengdang-dhora or a sword bearer to him, and made his preference known to all the other nobles, including Atan Buragohain.

But, contrary to his wishes, as soon as he died, the two sons of Chengmun Barphukan, Chikan and Sariah, with the help of their brothers and nephews Kamala, Langcha, Lokcha, Khamcha, Rangcha and Tolan, tried to grab the throne for themselves. The air of the palace grew thick with conspiracies, and treachery became a byword: "Then came Chikan and Sariah, the sons of Rajasahur (another designation of Chengmun). There was confusion

in the land and it became unsteady and tottering. The kingdom continued in a state of anarchy for three days: the conspirators and malcontents spread all over the country.”⁽⁵¹⁾

With steadfast loyalty and determination, Atan Buragohain took a firm grip on the situation. Backed by the other nobles, he had Chakara the Saring Raja brought to the palace at Bakota at the dead of night and declared him to be the new king, assuming the Ahom name of Supungmung and the Hindu name of Chakradhwaj Singha. The *patra-mantris* bowed before the new monarch and, one by one, pledged their fealty to him. At the ceremony of his installation the Brahman and Ganak priests were entertained with a feast and given many valuable presents. The Jayantia Raja sent an envoy to convey his congratulations, as did the Raja of Darrang, who had sided with Mir Jumla during the invasion!

However, Khamun Rajmantri Phukan came only three days later to pay his homage. The king was none too pleased at this delay, but he had to immediately prepare himself to receive the two envoys sent by Emperor Aurangzeb, originally meant for Jaydhwaj Singha's court. He, therefore, postponed investigations into the treachery of the Rajmantri's family members and their role in the insurrection till later.⁽⁵²⁾

It may be noted that after his return to Bakota, Jaydhwaj Singha had written a letter to Emperor Aurangzeb admitting that he had transgressed by invading Mughal-occupied territories and reiterated that he fully accepted the terms of the treaty of Ghilajharighat. Rather than accept graciously what amounted to an apology, the unscrupulous Mughal Emperor had tried to put salt on his adversary's wounds by sending two Ahadis (gentlemen-soldiers) as messengers, named Dor Beg and Rustom Beg, bearing a

letter and "gifts" which included a *sirpao* or a robe. Learning of their coming, Jaydhwaj Singha realized that he could not but accept the "gifts" since non-acceptance might arouse suspicion.

Yet privately, to his Ministers, he expressed his anguish that he had to wear an imperial robe sent to him because he was considered to be a tributary of the Mughals. As events turned out, he was spared such a humiliation, since he died before the messengers, travelling via Gauhati to Dergaon, could reach him.

The two imperial envoys had received fresh instructions to hand over the letter and "gifts" to the new king Chakradhwaj Singha. Escorted by Gadai, a messenger of Nawab Diler Khan Daudzai, and Rashid Khan's *Ukils* Taz Khan and Sheikh Kamal, the envoys travelled from Gauhati to the Ahom capital. In his letter Diler Khan advised the Ahom king to receive the tokens of imperial goodwill with proper respect. According to Mughal protocol, a tributary Raja had to descend from his throne and advance a few steps in order to be handed over the letter and gifts. He would then unwrap the robe from among the presents and wear it in their presence to drive home that he indeed was a tributary to the Mughal Emperor. The envoys had to report the exact manner in which the ceremony had proceeded back to the Emperor.

To state that the Ahom monarch Chakradhwaj Singha was loath to observe the rituals would be an understatement! He wanted his nobles to send the envoys back to where they came from without completing their allotted mission. Atan, however, warned against such an impetuous move because it might explode into the kind of friction for which the Assamese forces were not quite prepared. An astute individual, the king quite appreciated the potential

consequences and agreed to meet the imperial envoys, who had been heavily bribed to induce them to overlook any shortcomings in the observed protocol. The palm-greasing was reinforced by threats that they would immediately be executed if they refused to comply, and an excuse would be offered to Gauhati, Dhaka and Delhi that they had not extended curtesy to the Ahom monarch during the meeting! At the very last moment before being ushered into the royal presence they were bribed with an additional two hundred gold *mohurs* and two thousand silver rupees. Confronted with such inducements, buttressed by vicious threats, little wonder that the two envoys, Dor Beg and Rustom Beg, readily agreed to turn a blind eye to every breach of laid-down protocol!

It was an extreme form of diplomacy, designed to ensure that the Ahom king retained his dignity despite the ignominy of the occasion. The messengers of Diler Khan and Rashid Khan were barred from attending the meeting; a pile of heavy carpets were placed before the royal throne to give the impression that the king was standing when, in fact, he remained seated. The king asked Atan to inform the Emperor of his disappointment that though he had parted with his daughter and given three lakh of rupees and ninety elephants, he did not get back his old territorial limits. The prisoners who had been taken as hostages by Mir Jumla too had not been released.

He also sent Aurangzeb a letter which read: "The presents which you have sent through Dor Beg and Rustom Beg, consisting of a *sirpao* and a *jamdar*, were received by me by advancing a few steps and with dire salutation. I am remembering the Padshah a great deal. Being pleased with me you should always look upon me as your friend. I have made over my daughter to your *mahal* only because of the

friendship subsisting between us. It is desirable that our mutual friendship should ever be on the increase.” ⁽⁵³⁾

The two envoys were then sent on their return journey along with the letter and gifts for the Emperor, accompanied by Chandra Kandali Kataki and Sanatan Kataki to keep an eye on them. The meeting had been a charade, though of exigent necessity to provide the Assamese forces much needed breathing space for preparation for the inevitable conflict.



With Chakradhwaj Singha reluctant to take action against Khamun Rajmantri Phukan in deference to his long years of service, it gave the latter yet another opportunity to indulge in a treacherous act. This noble had failed to secure the Ahom throne for his grandson Kalia Gohain, and subsequently for his nephews Chikan and Sariah; now he attempted to grab it for himself. He conferred with the two envoys of Faujadar Rashid Khan who had stayed back for an audience with the king and suggested that if he is given backing by that officer, he would assassinate Chakradhwaj Singha and seize the throne. This offer was duly communicated to Rashid Khan who wrote back on December 5, 1663, pledging to despatch immediately “our horses, boats, soldiers and other necessary war materials.” ⁽⁵⁴⁾

Khamun's perfidious designs were uncovered, and his fellow conspirators, based on evidence provided by Laluk Dholakasharia Barua, Sanatan Kataki, Ganak Barua and Rama Brahman, were apprehended. These included his brother Lechai Harimuria Phukan, and Chikan and Sariah, all of whom were executed. A little later the same fate befell Kusumi and her sister, who had tried to escape to punishment.

by feigning ignorance of their relatives' designs but without success, as also the adopted son of Jaydhwaj Singha named Kalia Gohain. But even after incontrovertible proof of his treasonous actions had been furnished, Chakradhwaj Singha hesitated to take action against Khamun Rajmantri Phukan, but the latter spurned the offer of immunity asserting that since all his family members had been killed, he would stand bare like "a tree bereft of its branches and leaves," so it would be better if he too was executed. Accordingly, Khamun and his brother Lechai were strangled to death. ⁽⁵⁵⁾

By the end of February, with the complete extermination of the erstwhile Rajmantri's family, all threats to the continuation of Chakradhwaj Singha as the Ahom monarch ceased. Laluk Barua was made a Naobaicha Phukan for his role in the exposure of the conspiracy, while Atan Buragohain was made the Rajmantri.



Meanwhile, the two envoys of the Gauhati Faujadar, who had been made to cool their heels all the while, were growing more impatient and impolite. They began to voice their demand that they be bestowed all the privileges which had been accorded to the imperial emissaries and that they be given an immediate audience, during which they would offer salutation to the Ahom king by simply folding their arms and raising them. But, after being menacingly corrected as to their inferior status, they being merely the Faujadar's emissaries and not of the Mughal Emperor, they quickly changed their tune and agreed to offer salutations by salaam. Little wonder that they were none too well disposed towards the Ahom king and this was reflected in

their report back to their master. Slowly, but surely, friction was developing between the Ahom leadership and those of the Mughals, and it would not be long before the drums of war were sounded.

In September, 1664 the two Katakis of the Ahom Swargadeo, Chandra Kandali and Sanatan, who had been sent to Delhi, returned. They reported that they had been granted an audience with the Emperor, who had pledged that all the land which were in the possession of the Mughals in excess of the limits laid down by the Ghilajharighat Treaty would be returned to the Ahoms. He neither sent a letter to that effect nor an *Ukil* to communicate it, but directed the two Assamese emissaries to travel to Dhaka and meet Nawab Shaista Khan there, who would furnish them with a worded reply to the Ahom king.

But, at Dhaka, Shaista Khan's reply was that the territories in question belonged in fact to the Koches, so there was no question of these being returned. The Ahoms should be content with the boundary-line of Bharali River on the north bank and Kajali on the south. An envoy, Punditrai, had come with this message, but Chakradhwaj Singha sent him packing back quickly, not even bothering to send a formal letter with him.

By then the spirited nature of the new Ahom monarch could no longer bear the repeated humiliation being heaped upon the Assamese people whom he represented, and the subordinate status that was being conferred on him by the Mughals. He now summoned a conference with three of his most senior Ministers, Bagharia Atan Buragohain, Baghchowal Barpatra Gohain and Barukial Langi Bargohain, and addressed them thus: "Death is preferable to a life of subordination to foreigners. I have to surrender my independence for a suit of servile garments. My ancestors

were never subordinate to any other people, and I for myself cannot remain under the vassalage of the Mughals. I am a descendent of the heavenly king, and how can I pay tribute to the wretched Mughals? You should devise and adopt measures so that I can regain my garrison of Gauhati after expelling therefrom the foreign usurpers.”⁽⁵⁶⁾

Chakradhwaj Singha wanted to immediately proceed against the Mughals but the astute Atan Buragohain, never afraid to speak his mind, advised against premature action, delivering a memorable speech that bore sterling testimony to his pragmatic farsightedness and patriotic spirit.

“It is the legitimate duty of a king,” he told his monarch and fellow nobles, “to restore the old limits of his dominion by defeating and destroying his enemies. His success in war can alone enhance his glory and renown. So His Majesty’s proposal is just and proper. We have been enjoying absolute and uninterrupted sovereignty from time immemorial, and the high handed imperiousness of the Mughals has transcended the limits of our forbearance. His Majesty has only voiced the sentiments of his ministers when he declares that we should fall upon the Mughals this very moment. But we must provide the army with sufficient quantity of food provisions and war materials, and must hold in stock a sufficient reserve to enable us to replenish the stores of the expeditionary army as soon as they become empty. The task of supplying reinforcements will become a matter of frequent occurrence.

“The country has become depopulated owing to the flight of the villagers from their homes during the last war with Mir Jumla. His majesty has recently procured their return to their country and settled them in different places. We shall have to enquire whether these people have been able to obtain their rice and food. Rice is the most

indispensable of all the necessities of life; and if it fails, nothing will succeed. The officers who have to supply the allotted quota of boats, sailors and provisions, will now assert, on enquiry being made by Your Majesty, that they have got all the equipment ready, and that they will be able to deliver them whenever they will be required to do so. But it may be they will fail just at the moment when we shall badly need them; and nothing will come out even if we kill or chastise the officers in default. We shall have to face dire disaster in the eventual failure of boats and provisions. Unless we have sufficient surplus in stores at present how shall we meet the situation if war has to be prolonged for two or three years? We must take the necessary steps now, and arrange for all future contingencies. In the event of failure of supplies even torture or death will not help us in overcoming an emergency.

"A *karipaik*, or a humble subject of Your Majesty, buys an earthen pot to boil his coarse rice for the trifling sum of two cowries. Lest the rice and the pot, the total value of which will not, in any case, exceed twenty cowries or one *pice*, be spoiled, he tests the soundness of the vessel by striking it with the fingers at the bottom and the sides two or three times before making the purchase.

"A bird erects a nest on high where she hatches to life her young ones. She takes them round from one branch to another after they have grown up a bit. They are brought down to the ground when they can fly. If they are let loose before they become full-fledged they are eaten up by dogs and jackals. The mother bird leaves them only after they can pick up and eat their food themselves.

"Similarly, when the three batches of rowers, posted at the middle and two extremities of Your Majesty's barge, strike their oars simultaneously, the sight becomes beautiful

to look at, the oarsmen feel inspirited, the boat moves swiftly, and the helmsman wields the steering with ease and comfort. But, if on the other hand, there is no harmony and synchronism in the strokes of the three batches of rowers, the helmsman is inconvenienced in steering the shaft, the boat does not make any headway, and the spectators are far from being delighted.

“If the king directs his measures on the lines indicated above then only will he be able to vanquish his enemies and extend his territories to the old limits.” (57)

A shrewd individual as he was, Swargadeo Chakradhwaj Singha at once grasped the wisdom of Atan's words. Sure enough, when he enquired of the officer-in-charge of the armoury, Jayananda Tam Doloi, as to how much was the quantity of war material contained in the royal arsenal, he received the reply that a vast quantity was available for use. But, slightly later, the Doloi met the monarch in his inner sanctum and informed him that he had not spoken the truth about the state of affairs. “We do not possess even a single box of gunpowder. As regards shots and pellets we have not got in store even four boxes, nor do we possess even a stack of arrows. As Your Majesty put the question to me in presence of the assembly at the court, I deliberately submitted an encouraging though misleading report, because a contrary version will demoralize our own people and gladden the hearts of our enemy.” (58)

It was precisely what his Prime Minister Atan in his address had warned against when he had said that all those invested with the task of war preparations would resort to prevarications if questioned by the monarch. This episode substantiated the pragmatism of Atan's words and reinforced the contention that more time was needed to

ensure that preparations did not remain half complete. Chakradhwaj Singha gave immediate instructions that these required to be proceeded with expeditiously. Most important was the training of the troops, enhancement of their morale and imposition of a system to improve the army's efficiency. Every regiment was, therefore, divided into two sections, each having 500 soldiers, led by capable officers and equipped as would be required in the impending engagements. Since the soldiers were *paiks* and not professional combatants, it was imperative that they be thoroughly trained, and the king himself took to walk among the new recruits, stick in hand, watching and directing their training, and every now and then delivering to them impassioned speeches designed to rouse their nationalistic spirits.

He was quick to gauge the calibre of some of the recruits and reward them with a promotion to a higher rank carrying greater responsibility, thereby enhancing their self-pride. Aided by Atan and the other Ministers, he also personally toured his realm to ensure that farmers were cultivating their land to the most extensive length so that not only could they provide normal food for the army, but also enable provisions for emergency supplies and stores in reserve. Simultaneously, the production of weapons and guns was stepped up to a level of what was immediately required, the surplus of gunpowder, cannonballs etc. being stored in *golaghars* or armouries built for the purpose.

The building up of a powerful navy was as equally important as training up a land army. The group of Shans led by Sukapha which had originally migrated from Mungmau, being from a landlocked region, did not know much about building boats or wielding oars. Yet, within a short span of time, realising the importance of boats in a valley which had such a high concentration of rivers, they

learnt the required craft from tribes like the Chutiyas, who were expert boat-makers and oarsmen. By the time Swargadeo Suhungmung rose to the throne, the Ahoms had mastered the art of making boats, especially war-boats, and had built up a sizable navy adept at river-fighting, which was all that was required. Various *nao-saals* or boat-making dockyards had been set up all across the Ahom kingdom while there too were training centres to train up river-warriors. As a part of the war preparations the *nao-saals* then within the Ahom kingdom, near the capital Garghaon itself, as at other places such as Majuli as Sadiya, engaged full time in constructing war-boats for combat and also vessels for transport of men and material.

Assamese boat-builders were capable of making easily manoeuvrable vessels of complex designs by joining together planks of *chambal* wood, with the two ends so raised as to be very high over the water level. "Lac and bees-wax were used to caulk the gaps between the planks, as also a special resin bought from Apatani hill-tribesmen, known to the plains people as *Ahom-etha* (*Drymicarpus racemosa*). It is said that *Ahom-etha* once applied never came unstuck and provided waterproof coating to the vessel..... Four types of vessels were constructed — war-vessels, trading-vessels, passenger-vessels and racing-vessels, each with its peculiar features..... The *Hiloichoranaos*, with cannons mounted at the prows, were war-vessels first invented by the Chutiyas..... *Gochnaos* were huge, stately vessels employed in naval battles. Other boats used in warfare were *Bharinao*, *Gerapnao*, *Sulupnao* (a large and swift war-vessel), *Garaminao* etc."⁽⁵⁹⁾

During the earlier days the Ahoms merely had a small navy for civil purposes only under a Naoboicha Phukan. But as the kingdom expanded, leading to conflict with

formidable enemies like the Koches and Mughals, a separate military navy had to be created under an admiral designated as Pani Phukan to supervise the military units of the navy. Below him were the Bar Neogs who commanded smaller naval units. The training of these units was as rigorous as that of the army, something that was to stand the Assamese force under Lachit Barphukan in good stead in the days to come.

"Before launching operations against the Mughals, the Ahoms had realised the necessity of making provision for a protracted warfare as we learn from the speech of Atan Buragohain, Prime Minister. The Buragohain took into account the necessity of 'boats, sailors and provisions.' 'We shall have to face dire disaster,' said the Premier to King Chakradhwaj Singha and the counsellors, 'in the eventual failure of boats and provisions. Unless we have sufficient surplus in the store at present how shall we meet the situation if war has to be prolonged for two or three years? We must take the necessary steps now and arrange for all future contingencies.' The Ahoms, who possessed such practical foresight as to be able to anticipate all the eventualities of war did not fail to harness the vast resources of the country for the purpose of war preparations." ⁽⁶⁰⁾ Obviously, construction of boats on a mass scale and training of sailors to man them had been an important aspect of the war preparations.

Chakradhwaj Singha wisely carried on the strategy adopted by his predecessor Jaydhwaj Singha of wooing neighbouring Chiefs, no matter how small and of insignificant stature, in order to secure their assistance in the event of a conflict, or to prevent some of them from assisting the Mughals as they had done during Mir Jumla's invasion. The Ahom king despatched an embassy to Prananarayan along with a letter which read: "You know for yourself all about the manner in which we have dealt

heavy blows upon the Mughals. If God has inflicted on us a reverse on this single occasion, does it follow that we shall be subjected to discomfiture again?"

Prananarayan's reply to the letter held a pledge of cooperation: "What has happened is through the inevitable ordinance of Fate which alone is to be blamed, and nobody can overcome it. When fortune becomes favourable even a weakling can overcome a giant. If we two combine, the enemy will not obtain superior advantage; on the other hand, Fortune will offer a fitting opportunity to both of us for retaliation and revenge." ⁽⁶¹⁾

Continuing the correspondence, Chakradhwaj Singha wrote again: "You have sent the verbal message that war has commenced between Shewa (the Maratha king Shivaji) and the Mughals, and that Shewa, having defeated the Mughals, has pushed them back to a distance of twenty days' march, and that Daud Khan has fallen, and that Diler Khan is wounded, and that the Badshah has come from Delhi to Agra. It cannot be predicted as to who becomes vanquished, and who becomes victorious. You have asked us to strengthen our fortifications and to train our soldiers. It is meet and proper that you should give us such friendly advice and encouragement. Because the Mughals had discomfited us once, does it follow that we should make no attempt to throw off this position of subordination to them? They have discomfited us once, and we have dealt them severe blows on repeated occasions, and of this fact you are fully aware." ⁽⁶²⁾



The secrecy maintained by the Ahom king and his men proved to be effective. Totally unaware of the offensive preparations being carried on by the Assamese, the Mughal officials in Gauhati and Dhaka, as reflected in their

correspondence, continued to put pressure on Chakradhwaj Singha to complete payment of the war indemnity which was long delayed, but had to remain content with evasive replies. While Diler Khan Daudzai wrote to the king about the advisability of keeping the Emperor at Delhi happy, Faujadar Rashid Khan at Gauhati advised the Ahom king to correspond with the Mughal Subedar at Dhaka, to which Chakradhwaj Singha imperiously replied: "But it was never our practice to write to the Governor of Bengal. The Faujadar of Gauhati writes to my Government whenever the occasion arises, and my Ministers send replies thereto. It is our desire to follow the same procedure even now." ⁽⁶³⁾

Apparently, the Gauhati Faujadar was in the habit of making direct "requests" to the Ahoms, in a blatant display of arrogant superiority, thereby infuriating Chakradhwaj Singha, who retained enormous restraint and couched his replies in relatively polite terms. For instance, Rashid Khan once asked Atan Buragohain to send him some boats, each forty or forty-five cubits long, to be used for pleasure hunting. The Buragohain wrote back tactfully: "As for your request for boats, I searched for them. But I am sorry I could not get any boats of the required measurement. If I get such boats, they will be sent to you." Yet the Buragohain could not quite conceal his inner fury, which perhaps explains the cryptic phrase, almost amounting to a threat, "Do you think a boat is more precious than yourself?" with which the missive ended! ⁽⁶⁴⁾

On another occasion Rashid Khan asked the Buragohain to send him a Kakati or accountant to help him in the preparation of an inventory of the money and elephants received from the Ahoms and also calculate the amount and numbers yet to be received. The Buragohain's reply, as usual, was evasive: "We have maintained here

proper accounts of what we have delivered, and you must have done the same with regard to what you have received. What we have given you in the shape of elephants and money is only due to the reason that we have our four sons with you as hostages. Could you ever doubt that you will not get the balance?" (65)

Rashid Khan's demands for quick repayment of the balance amount of restitution continued to be frequent, the tenor of this letters becoming increasingly hostile. Though Chakradhwaj Singha's patience was wearing thin, it was Atan Buragohain who took it upon himself to send the replies, which were repetitive in that they reiterated the Ahom position as to the "causes" of the delay: "The extent of devastation recently undergone by our country is known to you well. It is for this reason that we have not been able to make over to you the full complement of elephants and money. We have already given you a substantial portion, and the delivery of the balance will be kept by us in view. Do you think that we have deliberately withdrawn payment of the indemnity? We shall send elephants when we catch them in the coming winter, and when the roads become dry for their transport. As regards the balance of the money, we have no money to give now. We have kept our four sons with you, and the Nawab knows the affection which a father bears to his children." (66)

Among the routine back and forth despatch of letters, there were moments of tension too, as for example when Rashid Khan accused the Assamese soldiers of murdering three Mughal subjects. Obviously, since the murders had taken place in Mughal territory, Assamese soldiers could not be blamed, and the accusation was merely an intimidating ploy. As usual, the Buragohain's reply was couched in a polite, reasonable tone: "You have made a

reference to some murders, but how is it possible for us to indulge in such wanton slaughter, and to what purpose, having kept our four sons, two Ukils and one Barmudoi in your care and custody? I would ask you to overlook this incident. You have fixed your eastern boundary at the Bharali River, and the incident has thus taken place in your jurisdiction, and how shall we know who is the murderer and who is murdered? It is not proper that you should hold us responsible for murders inside your territory. If it transpires that our subjects have perpetrated the offence we shall hand over the criminals to you, and you can cut off their heads. If the crime cannot be laid at the door of our subjects, then, what shall we do?" (67)

By then the Faujadar at Gauhati appears to have started to see through the dilatory tactics of the Assamese, and he now threatened to remove the hostages to Dhaka, where they perhaps would receive less cordial treatment. This plan was nipped in the bud by a Rajput official of the Mughal Faujadar, who used his influence to induce Rashid Khan to call off his plan. He took the sons of the Assam nobles under his own care and protection, and sent a reassuring letter to Atan Buragohain: "They planned to remove your four sons to Dhaka, but I succeeded in keeping them here in my place. They are living here in enjoyment, with the same happiness and comfort which they used to receive in their own homes. You should not entertain any anxiety on their account." (68)

Despite his bluster and threats Rashid Khan did not have the courage to call the Assamese bluff, and take any punitive action, which finally led to his replacement by Sayed Firoz Khan in March, 1667, who seemed to have been made of sterner stuff. Early in 1667 he sent a strongly worded letter once again demanding the immediate

payment of the remainder of the war indemnity. By then it was not clear how much exactly remained. In only one *buranji* is the amount referred to, but in a somewhat unclear manner. The problem seemed to have arisen from the fact that, with the Ahom treasury having been depleted of gold and silver, or so nobles like the Buragohain claimed, elephants were sent in lieu of money. These appeared to have been valued at Rs. 2000 each, which would make it seem that the Assamese still owed the Mughals approximately Rs. 1,12,000! ⁽⁶⁹⁾

The determination of Chakradhwaj Singha to immediately begin his retaliatory campaign against the Mughals was further strengthened by the insolent and condescending tone adopted by Firoz Khan. The last straw proved to be a most demeaning demand on the part of the Mughal Faujadar; he wanted Atan Buragohain to send to him some young damsels from Assam, whose beauty he had so much heard about from his predecessor, Rashid Khan, who it seems had been covertly acquiring a few Assamese girls through other means. ⁽⁷⁰⁾

Apparently, the demand was conveyed indirectly by Firoz Khan's revenue agent Bholanath Kanungo. In June 1667 the Kanungo wrote to the two Assamese representatives Madhabcharan Kataki and Purananda Kataki about this demand: "You should come with the remaining elephants along with Syed Jafar Ukil, and there should be no delay in the matter. After having informed your Gohains, you should bring with you two or three handsome girls for our Nawab *Saheb*. Our *Saheb* will be very much pleased when you come here with the girls, and you will receive proper rewards from our *Saheb*. Our *Saheb* has asked us to make this request and hence we have written to you. There should be

no slackness in the matter, and you should bring the girls with you when you come here." (71)

A Mughal underling having the gall to make such an indecent demand to an Assamese noble? It was an unprecedented demand, one that no Mughal had made to any other non-Mughal ruler! It was an indication of the low estimation of the Mughals as far as the Assamese were concerned! Chakradhwaj Singha was seized with fury when he learned of this, and even his nobles could not restrain him any longer. The Ahom monarch ordered the immediate despatch of his army with the objective of wresting back Lower Assam.

The time, finally, had come! The nobles under the leadership of Atan Buragohain had been undertaking preparations for such an eventuality for two long years. *Paiks* who had volunteered on their own to join the army had been given presents to take back to their families. Veteran soldiers, under the direct supervision of the king as well as the nobles, had been tutoring raw recruits as to the correct method of shooting arrows and wielding other weapons of war. In addition to preparing for land fighting the Assamese constructed a number of war-vesselson which cannons could be mounted, as also a large fleet of ordinary boats which could carry soldiers, food and war material. The army was systematically divided into a battalion of two sections totalling 1000 soldiers, commanded by a Hazarika, who had junior officers like Saikias and Boras under him; a bigger unit of 6000 was commanded by a Phukan. A parade was held before the monarch to satisfy him that preparations, indeed were complete.

Then came the all-important decision: who was to lead the vast army? For the objective ahead, it would have to be an extraordinary individual possessing extraordinary

martial skills. Above all, he would have to be someone who could rouse the incipient patriotism amongst the soldiers and inspire them to sacrifice their all in the service of their motherland. Apart from being a mighty warrior, he must be a capable administrator too, since he would also be entrusted with administrative tasks once the campaign was concluded.

Chakradhwaj Singha, in consultation with his nobles, court astrologers and the Brahmin and Deodhai priests, had already selected one such person. He was none other than Lachit Barphukan, the Braveheart of Assam!





ADVENT OF THE BRAVEHEART

Although historian-biographer Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan in his book *Lachit Barphukan and His Times* failed to find little documented information about the antecedents of Lachit Barphukan, as conceded by him, more recent researches have uncovered a number of details regarding his genealogy.⁽⁷²⁾

The family to which Lachit belonged was of ancient lineage, and his forefathers had accompanied the progenitor of the Ahom Dynasty when he had made his journey from Mungmau to the Brahmaputra Valley. Some of his forefathers are said to have held high offices during the reign of Sudangpha, popularly known as the Bamuni Kuonr.⁽⁷³⁾

Lachitis known to be the youngest son of the great warrior-statesman Momai Tamuli Barbarua, who rose to fame during the reign of the Ahom King Pratap Singha (1603-1641), and led the campaigns against invading Mughal forces during the reigns of Emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Many of the incidents of Lachit's life before he was appointed as Barphukan in 1667 by Chakradhwaj Singha, naturally enough, have been ingrained in Assamese folk lore.

The rise of Momai Tamuli Barbarua to the eminent positions that he held in the court of the Ahom king Pratap

Singha marks one of the strangest and most fascinating episodes in Ahom history. "Momai Tamuli had risen from a humble position in life to the office of the Barbarua, which combined the functions of the Chief Executive Officer and those of the Lord Chief Justice of the land. Sukuti, better known in history as Momai Tamuli, was at first an ordinary bondsman pledged to serve under his nephew for a sum of four rupees. One day, he was working with a hoe in a field by the side of the road to the Ahom necropolis at Charaideo, raising bunds for storing rain water. The nephew used to call him Momai, the term by which a maternal uncle is addressed in Assam, and Sukuti was popularly known as Momai amongst the persons of the locality. The Ahom king Swargadeo Pratap Singha, 1603-1641, passing by that road saw Momai at work, and was pleased with the trimness of Momai's operations in the paddy-field. The king, who had a keen eye for merit, released Sukuti from his obligations to his nephew, and appointed him first as Tipamia Rajkhowa, and afterwards as Bartamuli or Superintendent of the royal gardens. Momai Tamuli rose from one office to another till he was appointed Barbarua..... He was instrumental in enacting the famous treaty with Allah Yar Khan in 1639 which was the basis for Ahom-Mughal relations for decades to come. His foresight and courage was a great asset to King Pratap Singha." (74)

An individual of intense loyalty and devotion to the duties entrusted to him, Momai Tamuli was responsible for carrying out reformative measures designed to streamline the Ahom administration and societal structure, as also to boost the economy. There can be little doubt that Lachit, who according to some sources was born on 24th November, 1622, inherited his selfless patriotism and devotion to duty from his father.

Being the son of the leading officer of the realm, it can be surmised that Lachit grew up in a congenial environment, and received a formal education far superior to other children of the realm. In those days the practice amongst the higher nobility was to appoint learned teachers to impart knowledge to their wards which would ensure that the latter continued the family tradition of acquiring high posts in the administration. In Lachit's case too the Barbarua must have appointed erudite *pandits* who could tutor the lad in Ahom history and treatises, as well as the Hindu classics such as the *Arthashastra*.

One can presume that special instructors too were appointed to make the child a skilled fighter from a tender age. The instructions included martial arts and hand to hand fighting, training in archery, and wielding *hengdangs*, boatmanship, etc. Equally important was the training imparted as to how to handle weapons such as muskets, and also becoming familiar with cannons and their positioning in the midst of a battle, knowledge that would stand him in good stead in the campaign which he was fated to lead. During those days there was no separation of civil and military duties and every officer, no matter whatever his designation might be, was required to take up arms on behalf of the king when the need arose. Military training was, therefore, absolutely essential if an ambitious individual like Lachit was to climb up the ladder of success.

Moreover, as stated earlier, Lachit's forefathers were said to have travelled with the founder of the Ahom Dynasty, Sukapha, when he had come all the way from the Shan province of Mungmau to establish the Ahom kingdom with its capital at Cheraidai, and therefore formed the mainframe of the realm's administrative structure. Indeed, the Lukhurakhun clan to which Lachit belonged was of

very ancient origin, so professional versatility was demanded from every male member of its progeny. Thus, while Lachit inherited his sense of duty and fealty from his father, it was his instructors who imparted to him the extraordinary fighting skills which he displayed during the campaign against the Mughals.

Equally important was the real-life lessons that the intelligent boy picked up from the environment. "As regards Lachit's early education his father's courtroom in his metropolitan residence supplied a regular training camp and university. As Barbarua, Momai Tamuli had his usual establishment of subordinate officials and clerks who helped in transaction of State business at his own house, in deciding upon revenue and judicial complaints, receiving foreign envoys and discussing problems of Statecraft and diplomacy. He had allotted duties at the Secretariat, and the king's tribunals and households; but there was always plenty of business at his own house the results of which he had to place before the full cabinet for discussion and confirmation. The young Lachit saw and listened to all that passed in his father's official residence." ⁽⁷⁵⁾

From a tender age Lachit, as the son of the Barbarua, had easy access to the palace and frequent opportunities of attending the court. "It is also recorded that Lachit was made the scarf-bearer of the Premier, a position equivalent to a Private Secretaryship, which has been regarded everywhere as the first step in the career of an ambitious diplomat and politician. The scarf-bearer's first duty was to carry the bundle of betel-nuts and important documents of his master, and as such he had admission for royal audience and cabinet sitting attendance which was a matter of special prerogative. Lachit had thus the opportunity of supplementing what he had learnt at his father's court-room

by a knowledge of more important affairs transacted by the Premier and his colleagues.” (76)

As for what Lachit looked like, we have a fleeting reference in an old *buranji* which reads: “At the foot of Itakhuli was Lachit Phukan. His face is broad, and resembles the moon in its full phase. No one is capable of staring at his face.” (77)

Occasional mention of him in Ahom *buranjis* show that he rose up from lower ranks such as Ghora Barua, or keeper of the royal stables and Dulia Barua, the supervisor of the royal palanquins; he was also appointed to military related offices such as Simaluguria Phukan and is believed to have performed with valour during the Ahom campaign against Mir Jumla. In the course of time he caught the king's eyes and when Chakradhwaj Singha decided to wrest back Lower Assam which had been ceded to the Mughals, he chose Lachit to be the Barphukan.

“The supreme command of the expedition was entrusted to Lachit Deka, youngest son of Momai Tamuli Barbarua, the reputed statesman and General of Pratap Singha's time, who had earned renown in fighting the Mughals under Jahangir and Shahjahan. Lachit himself had given sufficient evidence of his prowess and power of leadership in fighting Mir Jumla's men at Dikhaumukh and in different posts held; e.g. Ghora Barua (Superintendent of the Royal Horses), Dulia Barua (Superintendent of *dola* or palanquin-bearers of kings and in charge of royal palanquin), Simaluguriya Phukan (Commandant of the levy usually posted at Simaluguri near the capital) and Dolakasharia Barua (Superintendent of the armed guards accompanying the king while moving on the royal sedan, and police constable, in effect Inspector General of Police of today).....the king had him tested in different ways and

he proved his mettle in all. Thus he was selected after considerable search and due tests and appointed Commander-in-Chief of the army and Barphukan in charge of civil administration in Lower Assam.” (78)

Assamese folk lore, of course, has a number of anecdotes relating to the choice of Lachit. At the time of his appointment he was the Dolakashariya Barua, or the officer who would ride by the side of the king's sedan. It is held that, in order to test the officer's leadership skills, the king asked Lachit to instruct the *duliyasor* sedan-bearers about what they had to do in different possible situations, which the officer carried out in a manner which pleased the king. The king then broached the subject of the plan to oust the Mughals from the soil of Assam, asking: “The enemies are in our immediate neighbourhood. How will it be possible to capture their leaders Syed Firoz and Syed Sana? The man whom I am going to appoint as General must be endowed with unusual grit, stamina and depth of judgment.” Lachit's reply was: “Could it be that there is no fit man in Your Majesty's realm? What are the enemies? They are after all ordinary mortals. Shall we not find similar men in our own country? Your Majesty should only confer the dust of your feet and the man equal to the occasion will be readily found.” The king liked the reply so much that, it is said, he immediately resolved to put Lachit at the head of the proposed expedition, a resolution that was soon confirmed by the nobles, astrologers and priestly advisers. (79)

It must be noted that there were several potential Commanders in the ranks of the Ahom nobles. Also, the individual finally chosen must be able to command the respect of the *patra-mantris* like Atan Buragohain who would be serving under him, thus he had to be chosen not on the spur of a moment, but after careful consideration.

Assamese folk lore mentions various tests Lachit was subjected to before he was formally declared as the Barphukan. For instance, it is said that when Lachit came for an audience before Chakradhwaj Singha a servant, on secret instructions from the king, snatched away his headgear, an act of grave insult. Unhindered by the fact that he was in royal presence, Lachit reportedly chased the servant and would have made mincemeat of him had not the king intervened! The king, apparently, was overjoyed at the unsophisticated courage displayed by Lachit, which reinforced his determination. ⁽⁸⁰⁾

"It was now time to officially appoint the Barphukan. Lachit was brought to the *Gharial Dhora* pillar (the main pillar of the *borsora*) at the southern end of the *sora*. He then touched the pillar with his right hand. The Majindar Barua or the officer in charge of recording the king's orders and reading out proclamations unrolled the epistle and read the order of appointment. The order mentioned that Lachit Barphukan had been appointed as the Generalissimo of the army, and he would look after the civil administration of Lower Assam. As soon as the order was read out, Lachit joined his hands towards the Swargadeo and then towards the crowd in the *borsora*. The seating mat of the Barphukan's *borpira* (stool) that was placed next to the Barbarua and which was waiting for its new occupant was changed to a new one. The Swargadeo motioned to a *ligira* to bring in the presents.

"*Aligira* soon walked in with a brass tray. On it was a *hengdang*, its blade shining like the moon and its grip made out of gold. Another *ligira* brought in the customary accoutrements of a Barphukan. Swargadeo descended from his throne, presented the *hengdang* to Lachit and adorned the paraphernalia on him. Lachit Barphukan bowed down

to the king, going down on his knees and joining his hands above the head....." (81)

The strenuous preparations of the past two years had come to fruition and the army and fleet which had been assembled was indeed a sight to behold. The Assamese directed by Atan Buragohain had left nothing to chance. A road from Jhanji to Teliadonga-pukhuri had even been constructed so that the army, headed by the new Commander Lachit, could manoeuvre upon it and carry out mock-drills which the king and his senior nobles observed to their satisfaction. On these occasions Lachit was dressed in full military regalia and the army was wearing uniforms and carried weapons denoting their field of expertise. The observers including the king were satisfied with the adroitness and synchronisations shown by the troops during these dress-rehearsals and were quick to appreciate that the crucial moment had arrived. That the entire parade was held upon a newly constructed road away from the public eye contributed to its secretive character.

"Possessed of exceptional judgement and grit, Lachit based his strategy on a clear grasp of the topography of the land, which required advance on land and water. So before setting out he held a consultations with the other Phukans and had the roads 'minutely' examined by men." (82) It was such familiarity with the terrain, as well as an instinctive knack for making best use of that knowledge, which assisted Lachit not only in the initial campaign to take back Gauhati and Lower Assam, but also during the latter conflict with the Mughals under Raja Ram Singha.



As stated earlier, Chakradhwaj Singha had sent emissaries to tribal chieftains and petty rulers of the region to assist, if possible, this army of retribution, and to remain neutral even if they could not, and the replies were

favourable. Also, long before the campaign had started the extremely efficient and intricate spy mechanism of the Ahoms had been put into action and the Commander and his lieutenants could draw up maps of Mughal defences based on the inputs provided by them; this invaluable data of the various forts and encampments, along with approximations of man-power and weaponry, enabled them to frame their attack strategy well in advance.

Two of the most eminent astrologers of the kingdom, Churamoni Doloi and Sarobar Doloi, had been deputed to go along with Lachit and his army and make predictions at each stage of the campaign. Now they made their calculations and selected Thursday, 20th August, 1667. The royal Ahom priests too backed their calculation and fixed the time of departure by the well-established "chicken-legs" procedure. The customary religious rites connected with the commencement of a campaign were performed according to the Ahom and Hindu priestly codes.

Prior to their departure, Lachit Barphukan, flanked by Atan Buragohain, Guimela Bargohain-Phukan, Kaliabaria Bargohain-Phukan, Nimati laluk Naoboicha-Phukan, Charingia Pelan Phukan, Miri-Sandikoi Phukan, Dauki Bheba Phukan Namdangia Rajkhowa, Kalanchu Sandikoi Dikhowmukhia Rajkhowa, Kalanchu's son Betmela, Haladhia Chenga Abhaypuria Rajkhowa, and Pani Abhaypuria Rajkhowa, lined up before the Ahom monarchs and nobles who were not to go on the campaign. They were all fully attired in their war dresses and, with their army stretched out behind them, their arms glinting in the sunshine, made an impressive sight.

Swargadeo Chakradhwaj Singha delivered his final address to the departing men: "I desire that your wives

and children and the cows and Brahmans should be duly protected and preserved; and that I should also acquire the prestige and reputation of having vanquished the Mughals. If you prove incompetent in the task of defeating the enemy at Itakhuli (Gauhati) you shall not be let off with impunity. And, do you think that there will be paucity of Commanders, Phukans and Rajkhowas like yourselves?" (83)

It was not much of an inspiring address, but the cheers of the crowds which had assembled to see the valiant warriors off well compensated for this. The spontaneous jubilation among the populace was sufficient indication that in the intervening years they had once more become inspirited by the sense of Assamese nationalism which had deserted them during the Mir Jumla episode. Given the ethnic and communal diversity among the ordinary soldiers, it was an Assamese army, rather than an Ahom army, which now readied itself to take back land usurped by outside invaders!

"Their preparations were made; and in August 20th, 1667, after sacrifices had been offered to Indra, a well-equipped army set out, to wrest Gauhati from the Mughals. The command was entrusted to Lachit, the son of the Barbarua, the great statesman-warrior of the reign of King Pratap Singha, who was appointed the Barphukan." (84)

The Assamese army, complemented by a formidable navy, having left Garhgaon both by land and water, proceeded to encamp at Kaliabar, which had been the former Headquarters of the Barphukan. From there it was split into two prongs, the one commanded by the Dihingia Sandiqui Phukan directing his efforts on the Bansabari camp on the north bank and, early in September, 1667, capturing it, and taking prisoners who included the leading Mughal

Commanders, Lal Beg and Roshan Beg, as also acquiring booty which was sent to Garhgaon.

The other prong on the south bank, led by the Nausalia Phukan was even more successful; the Mughal garrison at the Kajali fort, caught by utter surprise, was easily vanquished on 30 August, 1667 and its inmates, including five sardars, were put to the sword. At Kajali Raja Rai Singha was killed and Sayyid Khan was wounded. Several prisoners were taken and many horses, guns, shields and horns were captured and sent to Garhgaon. Both the forts were repaired and their defences reinforced for future use by the Ahoms. Having left two small groups of soldiers to man the forts, Lachit's army moved on.

The truth was that the Mughals, following such a cessation of hostilities with the Ahoms, had become complacent and the speed of the Assamese assault, together with the element of unexpectedness, ensured that they were easily overwhelmed. One by one the Assamese juggernaut rolled over the Mughal defensive forts and the garrisons stationed in them — Sonapur, Panikhaiti and Tatimara — were routed, and Lachit's forces were in sight of the principal target, the river-port of Gauhati. So rapid had been the speed of the Assamese approach and so great the complacency of the Mughals that the Imperial Governor of Gauhati, Syed Firoz Khan, was totally unprepared for such an eventuality and could not even summon for reinforcements from Dhaka.

"The Mughals had their capital strongly fortified. The main town was then situated on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. But five fortified *choukies* or watch-posts were set up on each bank. On the north there were two bigger fortifications at Shahburuz (Manikarneswar Hill opposite Gauhati) and Rangmahal. In the south fort

Itakhuli, fortified by a deep ditch, occupied a highly strategic site between the two such outposts, Jaiduar and Latasil *choukies*.”⁽⁸⁵⁾

After having thrown stockades at Shahburuz on Manikarneswar Hill, Lachit focussed on how to reoccupy Gauhati. The Mughals had strongly fortified this river-port city. The main fort was located on the banks of the Luit at Itakhuli. The first step taken by Lachit was to throw up two stockades on the mouth of the Barnadi River close to two Mughal outposts at that point. Baduli Phukan, the renegade who had switched over to the Mughal side, emerged with a sizable force from the fort at Shahbaruz, shield in hand, and charged the encamped Assamese army. There was a fierce clash during which two Assamese commanders. Haladhia Chenga Rajkhowa and Kalanchu Dikhowmukhia Rajkhowa were killed in hand to hand combat, after displaying great gallantry. The Assamese contingent stationed adjacent to the Shahburuz fort was routed and had to retreat. However, the Mughal assault was not sustained and Baduli and his men returned to the fort, and somehow the Assamese held on to their position on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. This early defeat was a pointer to how difficult it would be to capture the well-fortified Guwahati port-city. However, it did not affect the general course of the campaign. The other Phukans crossed the Barnadi and, after a stiff struggle lasting two days, captured Rangmahal and Shahburuz. But the Dihingia Sandiqui Phukan, realising that it was impossible to defeat the enemy on the north bank, decided to move to Jaiduar on the south bank where the Mughals were entrenched.⁽⁸⁶⁾

Itakhuli fort which stood at the core of the city's defences itself was guarded not only by its high walls and cannon-mounted battlements, but also by smaller

detachment of the army at various fortified locations around it. Lachit Barphukan, Atan Buragohain and the other commanders, holding a conference to study the situation, arrived at a decision. The Itakhuli fort being almost impregnable, those within it would have to be flushed out through a prolonged siege. This meant that an mere attack across the river-front would be futile and meaningless; so the other smaller fortified locations with fewer soldiers would have to be overrun so that the Itakhuli fort could be surrounded from all sides.

Mooring their war-boats on the south bank of the river Luit at Bonda village a little distance away from Gauhati, Lachit ordered a large body of soldiers to disembark and, placing Pelan Phukan in charge with orders to breach the city's defences and surround the Itakhuli fort, he himself proceeded up the river with an armada to assail it from the river-side. Those within the fort attempted to use their own gun-vessels to repulse the Ahom armada, but these proved to be no match to the superior firepower and had to give up the attempt.

The breaching of Gauhati's defences was effected at Jaiduar, the eastern entrance to Gauhati, an outpost linked to the inner city by a narrow road. Betmela Sandikoi, son of Kalanchu who had been killed at Shahburuz, employed an unusual tactic to draw the Mughals out! He walked alone up to the gate and shouted out a challenge: "If there be a Mughal *sardar* amongst you, let him come out and give me a fight." A Captain accepted the challenge and came out of the fort. In the duel which ensued, Betmela vanquished his opponent and decapitated him, though he himself was slightly injured. This totally demoralized the soldiers within the Jaiduar fortification and they were vanquished soon.

One by one the outlying defensive outposts around the Itakhuli fort were overrun and the Mughal forces retreated into it. The fort was now surrounded and could be laid under siege. Pelan Phukan observed with apprehension how well guarded the fort was and communicated its seeming impregnability to his commander. "I shall become the bondsman to the soldier who can storm the Itakhuli fort," seemed to have been the nature of his comment! Much to everyone's surprise some days later, even as the siege was in progress, a packet sent by Chakradhwaj Singha arrived at the Ahom camp.

It contained some ladies' apparel comprising *mekhelas* or lower garments worn by Assamese women, broomsticks and axes! The letter which was enclosed contained an order from the Ahom monarch that if Pelan had made such defeatist comments he should be executed, and his soldiers made to wear the female garments! "You are to rip open the heart of Pelan Phukan and send it to me," the accompanying letter read. "Should he speak in this way? As to the other soldiers who entertain similar defeatist views, make them wear the *mekhelas* and beat them with broomsticks." Pelan and his fellow officers swore that such a comment had never been made, a reply which apparently satisfied the Ahom king and the matter was no more broached upon. ⁽⁸⁷⁾

But that message served as a warning to expedite the capture of Itakhuli fort. Two months had passed since its siege had begun, but there was no sign that the Mughals inside were ready to surrender. Adding to the danger was the possibility that news of the Assamese assault could somehow have reached Dhaka and reinforcements might already be on their way. Thus a frontal attack became inevitable.

But the Assamese had always been cunning in their warfare and they employed an ingenious stratagem to thoroughly debilitate the Mughal defences. A stealthy night assault under the leadership of Japang Gohain was put into operation. Lachit Barphukan had trained up a special task force of commando soldiers who were known as *Chor-bachas*, possessing extraordinary skills, and employed for spying on the enemy, or for undertaking missions which required skills and courage not possessed by ordinary soldiers.

The Gohain ordered a few of these *Chor-bachas*, dressed completely in black, and taking advantage of the fact that the Mughal soldiers in the camp were absorbed in their pre-dawn prayers, to scale the walls of the fort in the darkness without being seen and pour water into the muzzles of the Mughal cannons. Then, on the night of Thursday, the seventeenth Kartik, 1589 saka (November 4, 1667CE), the Assamese forces launched a fierce direct attack on the Itakhuli fort, accompanied by blood-curdling yells. ⁽⁸³⁾

The bewildered Mughals suddenly discovered that their cannons, the primary weapon of defence, would not fire. Even as the cannons from their war-boats pounded the Itakhuli fort from one side, Assamese warriors scaled the walls of the fortress with the help of ladders and went on a killing spree. Hundreds of Mughal warriors were slaughtered, with no prisoners being taken. The *buranjis* speak of two female warriors who issued from the Itakhuli fort even as the battle was raging, but they were chased by the Assamese soldiers as they crossed the Brahmaputra and were finally trapped at Ashwakranta! Within the fort the Assamese acquired a huge treasure-trove belonging to the Mughals. While the cash was distributed among the soldier

the rest of the booty was carried back to Garhgaon to be given to the king.

The Comprehensive History of Assam, edited by H. K. Barpujari, offers us a broad outline of the developments which finally led to the capture of the vital Itakhuli fort. "In the south the chief objective of the Assamese being Itakhuli fort, they encamped about a mile eastward near Latasil, while their boats anchored near village Bonda on the river. Inertness in battle was made a capital dereliction of duty. Braving a stiff resistance from the concentrated Mughal defences in the fort, they besieged Jaiduar, an eastern entrance of Gauhati by stratagem. They also encamped before Pandu *choukie* and occupied it. The arrival of several Mughal warships with reinforcements failed to save Jaiduar, the gateway of Itakhuli, from the heroic feat of Betmela Sandiqui, who lost a finger. Occupying Jaiduar the Assamese advanced into Gauhati and threw stockades keeping Itakhuli fort within the range of their arrows and guns. Under directions of Abhayapuria Rajkhowa, the new Commander, in place of Pelan Phukan, reported to have betrayed a defeatist mentality, the commandos or spies put water in the muzzles of the Mughal guns to make them ineffective.

"Isolated confrontations led to the failure of the Mughals at Umananda, Barhat, Agiathuri, Marakia, Rewa and Lathao. The grand attack was launched on fort Itakhuli towards the end of the night of 4 November, 1667 and the walls were scaled by ladders. Thus the fort was captured after nearly two months, along with war provisions, guns, brass, copper, gold and silver, boats and all kinds of animals. Most of the defenders were massacred.....The victors entered the capital about the middle of November, 1667." ⁽⁸⁹⁾

Just after the taking of Itakhuli fort some Mughal warships under a few *sardars* did arrive to render assistance, but the Assamese navy attacked them, and drove them away from Umananda and Barhat and the army, proceeding on land and water, occupied Agiathuri and Saraighat on the north bank, Pandu on the south bank and reached Kalahimukh which lay at the mouth of the Kalahi or Kulsi above Nagarberra.

Some Mughal soldiers and their Commanders, including the Faujadar Syed Firoz Khan and his Mirbukshi Syed Sala, managed to escape through a secret passage at the back of the Itakhuli fort which led directly to the Brahmaputra River. Despite being attacked by snipers and having guns of the Assamese ships being trained on them, they managed to board the ships moored at the *ghat* and sail downstream towards the Manas River, beyond which they had a garrison. The Assamese ship under Lachit Barphukan, the Dihingia Phukan and Pelan Saringia Phukan gave hot chase. On the way the strength of the fleeing Mughals was augmented when a number of ships carrying soldiers and supplies sent as reinforcement from Dhaka joined them, but by then it was too late. The impetus and advantage lay with the Assamese. The astute strategist Lachit, pre-guessing that a section of the Mughals might make a bolt for it, had placed a force of highly trained sharpshooters and archers under the command of Miri Sandikoi Phukan at the mouth of the Manas River who picked out the fleeing Mughal soldiers one by one, forcing their beleaguered leaders to wave the white flag of surrender.

"As the routed Mughal troops were sailing down towards the river Manas, they were intercepted at the mouth of the river. In the engagement that ensued, Assamese sharpshooters began to mow down the fugitive enemy. A

prince of Dimarua, who was sitting on an elephant with Maupia, was killed by a shot from the Assamese side. His companion was then made to alight from the elephant, and transferred to a horse. The Faujadar Syed Firoz Nawab then sent a message offering his submission to the Assamese and asking the latter to desist from firing their guns or shooting their arrows. The Assamese asked the Mughals to lay down their weapons. This was done and the battle came to an end.

“Faujadar Syed Firoz Khan and his Murbikshi Syed Sala were captured and brought up as prisoners. The Assamese also rescued a large number of countrymen who had been taken as hostages by Nawab Mir Jumla. The sons and nephews of the *Dangariyas* — Dhala, Langli and Ramrai, who had lived in Gauhati as hostages, had died meanwhile, and the Faujadar had sent up their bodies to Garhgaon for the performance of the funeral obsequies. The abovementioned Maupia, the son or Rajmantri Phukan, was now the only surviving hostage. The Ahoms also got possession of the Mughal stores consisting of war-provisions, (cannons, matchlocks and ammunition, weapons), as also boats, horses, elephants, camels, bullocks, buffaloes, asses, and a large quantity of gold and silver, and brass and copper.”⁽⁹⁰⁾

A commemoration stone pillar at Gauhati set up shortly after the conclusion of the campaign marked this famous victory and the wresting of Lower Assam from the Mughals. The Sanskrit translation reads as: “In the year 1589 *saka* there flourished the Barphukan of Namjani (Lower Assam), the son of the Barbarua (Momai Tamuli). He became victorious in the war waged by the Yavanas in the full array of various kinds of weapons and arms, elephants, horses and Captains. The body of the Barphukan is adorned by all varieties of ornaments, his heart is

illuminated by manifold learning, he is endowed with the qualities which are not tainted by the sins of *Kali-yuga*, he is effulgent in prowess and enterprise, he is the commander of elephants, horses and soldiers, and he is like an ocean in regard to fortitude, self-respect, heroism and gravity.”⁽⁹¹⁾

Not only was the victory given the pride of place in almost each and every prominent Ahomburanji, it was also inscribed on plaques and cannons at various places in Assam. For example, an inscription on a cannon found at Silghat near the Simalugarh fort in the Nagaon District refers to the recovery of the weapon and bears the Sanskrit inscription: “King Chakradhwaj Singha, having again destroyed the Mughals in battle in 1589 *saka*, obtained this weapon, which proclaims his glory as the slayer of his enemies.” An inscription in Assamese on the Kanai Barasi rock near the Mani Karneshwar temple in Kamrup, records the erection of an Ahom fort there in *saka* 1589 “after the defeat and death of Sana and Syed Firoz.” Another old cannon at Dikom bears similar inscription, which refers to a victory in the following year. This cannon is peculiarly interesting, as it also has an inscription in Persian, reciting that it was placed in charge of Saiad Ahmad at Husain for the purpose of conquering Assam in 1704 *hijri* (1663 CE).”⁽⁹²⁾ There too are two stone inscriptions in Assamese at Kanai-barasai-boasil in North Guwahati upon the Phulungargarh rampart which eulogizes local victories, as also in many other spots.



The victory at Gauhati, won by the Assamese under the leadership of Lachit Barphukan, resulting in the recovery of Kamrup up to the Manas, was a momentous chapter in Ahom-Mughal relations. It was the first round in turning

the tide against the Mughals. In the next four years the Assamese regained the prestige lost in 1663. Subsequent developments showed that the Mughals could never again attain the supremacy they had once enjoyed in this region!

“When the news of these successes reached the king, he was overjoyed, and showered presents on his successful Generals. Gauhati was chosen as the headquarters of the Barphukan, Pandu and Saraighat were strongly fortified, and prompt arrangement was made for the administration of the conquered territory. A survey of the country was carried out and a census was taken of the population.” ⁽⁹³⁾

It had been primarily due to the inspiring leadership of Lachit Barphukan, the support provided by his lieutenants, in particular the astute Atan Buragohain, as also the strong backing given by the Ahom monarch Chakradhwaj Singha that within the space of a few months the Assamese wrested back their lost territory and redeemed their reputation and prestige. When the news of the victory was carried to the Swargadeo, he is reported to have cried out: “It is only now that I can eat my morsel of food with ease and pleasure.” ⁽⁹⁴⁾ He sent appropriate presents to all the officers at Gauhati, even as he called upon them to remain vigilant as it was certain that Aurangzeb at Delhi would not take the defeat of the Mughals very lightly and would send a retaliatory army. He himself sailed to the temple at Biswanath in the north bank to offer a sacrifice to the deities for having conferred on him the blessing of a victory.

Soon afterwards a feeble attempt was made by Mughal allies to take back some territory. “In 1688 there were hostilities with the Mughals at Rangamati, where a Raja named Indra Daman was apparently in command; his troops were defeated at Kakphak, on the south bank of the Brahmaputra but, on his coming up in person with

reinforcements, the Ahoms fell back to Saraighat. His attack on this place failed, and he retreated to Jakhalia.”⁽⁹⁵⁾

Because of the lightning fast campaign launched by Lachit Barphukan Lower Assam including the all-important river-port of Gauhati and an area extending up to the Manas River once again became a part of the Ahom kingdom. While enjoining Lachit to consolidate his hold on the retaken area, Chakradhwaj Singha fortified the earlier boundary at Kaliabar by changing the temporary fortification there into a permanent stronghold known as Rangaliburuz.

Ever the diplomat, Atan Buragohain, in his capacity as the chief among the nobles, wrote a letter to the Bengal Nawab Shaista Khan apprising him of the developments in Lower Assam, but tactfully refraining from hammering home the devastating nature of the Mughal defeat. “All the prestige and honour of our country vanished,” read the letter, referring to the attack by Mir Jumla, “when you devastated our territories. We then promised to give three lacs of rupees and ninety elephants. We made that promise only to preserve our boundaries as well as our integrity and honour. In pursuance of that promise, we have given to you elephants and money, and our sons are with you as surety for the balance of the indemnity. Still we have not got back our territories, nor our subjects who had gone over to your land. Rashid Khan Nawab inflicted severe insults on our envoys during the reception at Umananda: and our Barmudoi was also grossly abused and scolded. Besides, requests are made for the supply of damsels, and when they are sent they are returned back. His Majesty the Swarga-Maharaja of Assam became highly incensed on receiving reports of these affronts, and he commanded us to attack Gauhati; but we interceded at the feet of this

monarch, and he condescended to withdraw his orders. After this, Syed Firoz, on assuming charge of his office (as Faujadar of Gauhati) deputed Syed Jafar Ukil to our place. His Majesty came to know that Syed Firoz Nawab was a good man, and we also came to the same conclusion. We sent nine elephants to Gauhati during the stay of Syed Jafar Ukil at our place. We were then told that Syed Firoz Nawab had made a request for furnishing him some virgins. Having heard this, the Swargadeo was seized with indignation and wrath, and ordered an attack on Gauhati. Now, if you are desirous of establishing friendly relations with us, then please send for that purpose Ukils and epistles. If you have no desire, well, it is your lookout. What shall I say more? You are all-knowing yourself.” (96)





THE DEFENCE STRATEGY

Lachit Barphukan had demonstrated his martial prowess, not content to direct his soldiers from the rear but, *hengdang* raised and battle cries issuing from his throat, battled the enemy alongside his soldiers, inspiring them into their utmost efforts. He too, along with extraordinarily astute and capable lieutenants such as Atan Buragohain, had planned the campaign each inch of the way, deploying troops at strategic places and using every tactic at his command. But now that the near impossible had been achieved, and the enemy had been sent packing out of Assamese territory, Lachit “the warrior” had to retire to the stern, and Lachit “the defence strategist” had to take up the helm!

There must be no complacency; a titanic effort to retain the fruits of victory in an abiding way had to be made. All the participants in the war, from the monarch Chakradhwaj Singha to the common soldier, were all too aware that Aurangzeb, the Mughal Emperor in far off Delhi, would react belligerently to the developments and send a sizable force to regain lost territory. But this time the Assamese were determined that the “success” of Mir Jumla will not be repeated and their territory no more usurped. Thus the

leaders, urged on and well supported by Garhgaon, began putting into operation a multifaceted strategy to repulse any offensive the Mughal Emperor might throw at them.

The most exigent requirement was to streamline the civil administration of the conquered area which had been so violently disrupted by the conflict. The Mughals during their occupation had replicated in Lower Assam the zamindari system which they used in Bengal. This system was distinctly different from the *khel* and *paik* system prevailing in Ahom ruled territory, whereby the civil population had to give service to the State rather than pay revenue. The Barphukan in consultation with the Buragohain decided that rather than disturb the existing arrangement in Lower Assam and make it correspond to the system prevailing in Upper Assam, it would be more pragmatic to persist with it. Thus the division of Kamrup into *parganas* was retained though, naturally, it was Assamese officers who were appointed to manage these.

Realising this exigency, Garhgaon sent almost all of its finest military and civil officers to Gauhati to help run the administration. As was later seen, this weakened the administrative structure in Upper Assam leading to unfortunate developments, but at that precise moment there was no help for it. The reoccupied territory had to be retained at all costs and all efforts had to be directed towards this objective.

The Barphukan retained the Pati-Darang, Barbhag and Bangeswar *parganas* under his direct control, while the *parganas* of Khata and Banbhag were placed under the Paniphukan, Pubpar and Paschimpar under the Duara Phukan, Sarubangsar and Kachari-mahal under the Deka Phukan, and Ramsa and Sarukhetri under the Chetia Phukan. Similarly, Barkhetri was placed under the Dayangia

Rajkhowa, Chayania under the Tar-Salangura Rajkhowa, Barhanti under the Gajpuri-Rajkhowa, Chamaria under the Dikhowmukhia Rajkhowa, Nagarberha under the Pani-Salaguria Rajkhowa, Bagaribari under the Pani-Dihingia Rajkhowa, Barpeta under the Tarua-Dihingia Rajkhowa, Barnagar under the Namdangia Rajkhowa, Bajali under the Pani-Abhoypuria Rajkhowa, Bekeli under the Bar Abhoypuriya Rajkhowa and Bausi under the Saru Abhoypuria Rajkhowa. ⁽⁹⁷⁾

Interestingly, such a distribution of the *parganas* to be administered by the above mentioned officials, which invested them with the responsibility not only of ensuring that revenue was collected, but also for the defence of the areas in case of an assault by foreign forces, continued right up to the days of Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha (1681-96) when, after some officials entrusted with the running the *parganas* became inordinately powerful and conspired to seize the Ahom Viceroy Gargayan Sandikoi Phukan. In the nick of time the conspiracy was nipped in the bud and the officers were divested with the task of running the *parganas*, and their administration came directly under the charge of the Barphukan. ⁽⁹⁸⁾

Given that the zamindari system of revenue collection was retained in the *parganas*, the Chaudharis, Bujarbaruas, Thakurias and Patwaris who were employed to collect periodic dues from the peasantry, were replaced by officials appointed by the Assamese administration. Certain vassal chiefs, known as Satrajas and Panchrajas, too were utilised to collect revenue. ⁽⁹⁹⁾

Simultaneous to the streamlining of the administration of Lower Assam, Lachit Barphukan and Atan Buragohain, engaged in daily confabulations with the senior Assamese officers as to how to strengthen the fortifications at Gauhati,

which appeared to be strategically the most advantageous position from where to repulse the Mughals. A suggestion by some of the officers that Samdhara near Tezpur because of its existing infrastructure would be a better option was summarily rejected. Lachit pointed out that Samdhara was too inland, from where, in case of an Assamese reverse, the enemy could easily sail on to occupy Garhgaon, as had happened during the invasion by Mir Jumla. Gauhati was therefore finally selected because of its strategic advantages and plans were drawn up to render the port-city as impregnable as feasible.

The implementation of the fortification plans brooked no delay, and the premier noble, Atan Buragohain, was given the job of overseeing the construction. The Ahom monarch Chakradhwaj Singha, on being apprised through epistles of the plan for the defence of Lower Assam, thoroughly approved of them. He concurred that his principle Minister Atan Buragohain, given his past experience with military defensive construction, should be the overall supervisor of the preparations, particularly the construction of the earthen ramparts, work on which was begun immediately. Thousands of soldier-workers toiled day and night to erect ramparts which proved to be marvels of constructions that could withstand the fury of Assam's climate for centuries later. The Premier employed every resource he possessed to carry out the mammoth task in a miraculously short span of time, in consultation with and assisted by officers and men who were familiar with these kinds of structures.

"Priority was given to constructing a fort and Pandu-Saraighat. In effect this meant the erection of twin forts on the two sides of the river at Saraighat (modern Amingaon) in the north and Pandu in the south. The project, including

the rampart at the Manikarneshwar temple in North Gauhati, and a fort at Shahburuz, 'a frontier place to Saraighat,' and five other forts in Desh Rani at Dairanibai, Kathalbari, Kalahi, Nagarberra and Boko in the south, was entrusted to Premier Atan and he completed it in record time and to perfection. Lachit Barphukan had to deal with the problem of manning strategic points. Passes and defiles near Gauhati were inspected under the pretext of hunting. Trained artillerymen took charge of batteries and guns placed at intervals on bastions of the ramparts, hills, hill-slopes and valleys. The traditional art of setting up improvised walls and stockades on river banks and in midstream and bridges of boats across the Brahmaputra and of suddenly withdrawing them to sweep away the approaching enemy with gushing water, was now perfected. The entire war zone from Pandu to Asurar Ali on the south and from Agiathuri to Kurua on the north was divided into sectors, each under a tried officer. In the south Lahan Hazarika was posted in Kalahi fort, but Lachit Barphukan was in charge of the headquarters at Gauhati on Itakhuli Hill in the south. Kaliabar, temporarily fortified so long, was now strengthened as a permanent fort and christened Ranganliburuz. In the north five Phukans came with armies to stay at Kathalbari fort, but Atan Buragohain of the northern base was at Lathia Parvat fort with Baghchowal Barpatra Gohain of the eastern command in the north at Kurua. The river was guarded by Laku Hazarika, Landaomi Hazarika and the son of Haranath." (100)

What emerged from the exertions were some of the most wondrous defensive structures to be seen in medieval India, not comparable to any that might have been erected in any battle of that era. The basic, underlying concept, was simplicity itself. The landscape of Gauhati was dotted

with relatively low and verdant hillocks, which could be converted into encampments to house a sizable army and war-provisions. Some of these hillocks were close to both banks of the Brahmaputra, providing the defenders with the advantage of height in launching a barrage of artillery at enemy war-boats coming up the Brahmaputra, or troops advancing by land.

However, there were gaps between the hillocks; these were closed with tall earthen ramparts, the resultant structure providing a mammoth, protective ring around Gauhati about twenty-five miles in circumference. Soldiers and cannons were posted on the hillocks and ramparts according to the *pali* system followed by the Assamese. This system entailed that individual soldiers and group commanders were entrusted with a *pali*, or a particular area, of the hillocks and ramparts erected between them, which they had to guard. The Commander of each *pali* was provided with a contingent of soldiers and the required weapons and ammunition, and other provisions.

He also had a number of *Chor-bacha* commandos to boost up his defences, collect and gather information as to the enemy's movements in the *pali*'s immediate vicinity, as well as perform acts which required extraordinary courage and skills. The *palis* covered every feet of the defensive structure from the south to the north bank so that there was not a single break.

Lachit and Atan Buragohain ensured that one soldier was posted around 13.5 feet apart on the hillocks and around 9 feet apart on the ramparts. The systematic distancing was meant to prevent any portion of the defences being overrun as also to facilitate communication between the different sections of the army. Batteries were also mounted at specific interval on the crest of the hills, manned by expert artillery men.

As described in some *buranjis* the equipment of each soldier comprised "two stacks of arrows, two quivers, one bow, two torches, one shield, one *chaktalia* (probably some sort of armour-plate) for wearing on the body, one *borchata* (umbrella) in front, one pair of *chak* (probably a device necessary for firing a gun). The soldiers in the front row were each given two bundles of *chaks* for their matchlocks. The Barphukan himself took this kit and others followed suit."

"On the earthen ramparts in the plains a soldier was posted at an interval of nine feet, and on the hills at every thirteen-and-a-half feet. The length of each *pali*, and the number of different types of guns to mounted in each, together with the number of bastions, were rigidly defined; and the relative distances of the hills and ramparts were also carefully measured and recorded. The materials necessary for constructing forts on sands were specified to minutest detail. An officer with his personal detachment was placed in charge of a fixed portion of the fortified zone. The effect of all this was to render the fortifications an impenetrable wall of defence. The arrangements arrived at after mature deliberations at the war-council was reduced to writing to serve the purpose of a staff manual so that they might be automatically carried out involving the least disturbance to the general scheme of defensive measures." (101)

Such a gigantic, fortified, and well manned ring, extending from Pandu to Asurar Ali on the south bank and Agiyathuri to Kurua on the north, enclosed Gauhati in a cocoon of safety, that port-city being now open to attack only across the Brahmaputra River which cut through it. "The impregnable character of the fortifications, made so by nature and by man, led the Assamese to say afterwards that they were made by Viswakarma, the god of

engineering, and that they were impenetrable even to the gods.”⁽¹⁰²⁾

It needs to be noted that such a structure, no precedent for something similar being seen in any war of medieval India, was essential to Lachit's strategy. He well know that the absence of a cavalry made his land army vulnerable to the mounted soldiers whom the Mughals would certainly bring, and Assamese foot soldiers were understandably terrified of them. Thus Lachit preferred a river battle rather than one on ground, and his strategy was to use the hills and ramparts to prevent the latter, and entice the invading army into battling his forces on the Brahmaputra. In the case of a river battle, in Lachit's own words, “they could fight as if sitting in their own homes.”⁽¹⁰³⁾

The terrain in and around Gauhati too reinforced the contention that it was strategically the most advantageous position to defend the motherland. The area was dotted with numerous water bodies whose channels opened out to the Brahmaputra; Ahom ships could lurk upon them, to emerge stealthily after enemy ships had passed to attack them from the rear. One such water body at Gauhati was the *Dighali Pukhuri* which had a channel to the Brahmaputra River, and apart from being used for the above purpose, was also converted as a dockyard for Assamese war-boats. An arms and ammunition factory was set up on a hill so as to facilitate quick availability of armaments, the hill later coming to be called Kharguli or the place where gun-powder and cannonballs were made.

Lachit, on his part, made his naval troops practice and perfect the art of building bridges of boats which could span the Brahmaputra from one bank to the other, necessary when troops from one bank had to quickly cross over to assist their brethren upon the other bank, a strategy

that was unique to the Assamese defensive tactics and not seen in any other medieval battle in India.

Another unique and striking feature of the defences on the Brahmaputra River itself was the construction of wooden stockades within the waters, a skill not known to any other people in India. Such stockades were made possible because the Brahmaputra flowed not as a single channel, but in numerous channels with sandbanks in between. So trunks of wood could be driven into the river bed from one sandbank to another, thereby forming a wooden bridge across the flow. The river stockades proved effective barriers against enemy vessels, and also provided vantage points from where to fight them. So skilled were the Assamese workmen at building such stockades that these weathered the fury of the river currents even during the monsoons when it was in full flow. They had gate-like passages which could be opened to allow their own boats through.

Interestingly, the defensive preparations even though incomplete proved adequate to repulse the attack by the Mughals under Raja Indra Daman in 1668, which has been mentioned earlier. It may be recalled that the Ahoms made a tactical retreat from their forward positions to allow the Nawab of Dhaka's troops to advance to Saraighat, where they were set upon and comprehensively routed. This relatively low scale assault was actually a blessing in disguise for it showed up some of the defensive shortcomings at Gauhati which might hinder confrontation with a bigger army.

Enlightened further by that experience, Lachit in his headquarters at Itakhuli, and Atan Buragohain in his at Lathia Parvat on the opposite bank, together began rectifying the discovered lacunae in their defensive

preparations. "The whole area was divided into a number of sectors, each being commanded by an officer of distinguished gallantry and proven efficiency. The war zone extended from Pandu to Asurar Ali on the south bank, and from Agiathuri to Kurua on the north. Itakhuli Hill, commanding a view of the entire area, was the headquarter of the General Lachit, while the Buragohain remained in charge of the northern division at his base on Lathia Parvat. The eastern command on the north was in charge of Baghchowal Barpatra Gohain whose headquarter was at Kurua. The whole arrangement was a masterpiece of strategy and planning, and it appeared no enemy would be able to break into the invulnerable environs of Gauhati." (104)"According to a report submitted to Emperor Aurangzeb on December 10, 1669, the total strength of the army at the disposal of the Barphukan at Gauhati came up to one lac, of which the cavalry was very small in number." (105)

Many of the Ahom *buranjis* give detailed, occasionally quaint descriptions of the deployment of the commanders of the *palis*: "On the south bank, the whole area was under the direct command of the Generalissimo Lachit Barphukan. His camp was situated at the foot of Itakhuli or Sukreswar Hill in Gauhati. He was armed with a sword and a bow, and he wore a war-cap.....

"Khahua Patra Gohain-Phukan of the Bargohain family, was in charge of the *pali* from Amrajuri to Pandu.

"Luthuri Chetia Opar-Dayangia Rajkhowa, from Rangeliburuz to the western steps leading to the Kamakhya temple, with 80 *Chor-bachas*. He was equipped with a war-pony, a war-cap, a sword, and a bow and a spear.

"Latum Dolakasharia Barua, from the western step of Kamakhya to Duar-garila, with 360 *Chor-bachas*. He

was tall in stature and, and was equipped with a pony and a sword. He wore a *gati* or a cloth tightly wrapped round the body with the two ends made into a knot near the waist.

"Barcheng Gohain, from Duar-garila to Paraghopa, with 360 *Chor-bachas*. He had a sharp sword in his hand.

"Thakua Bandukial Bargohain, from Paraghopa to Dhenukhiria, with 80 *Chor-bachas*. He had a sword in his hand.

"Bethabar Hazarika Lekai Chetia, son of Lechai Kari, from Gotanagar to Fatasil, with 80 *Chor-bachas*. He carried a sword and a spear, and wore a war-cap. He was short and stout, and dark complexioned.

"Neog Gohain, from Fatasil to Asurar Ali, with 60 *Chor-bachas*. He was short and small in stature, and was quick in his movements. He carried a spear and a curved sword in his hands, and wore a war-cap.

"Hatrai Kaliabaria Gohain-Phukan of the Bargohain family, on the Asurar Ali, with 100 *Chor-bachas*. He was slim in size and swift in pace; and he carried a *dao* and a spear, and wore a war-cap and a *gati*. He rode on a sedan while supervising his *pali*. He was fearful to look at.

"Lahman Marangi-khowa Chetia of the Bargohain family. On the hill situated to the south of Asurar Ali, with 100 *Chor-bachas*. He was slim in size, and dark and shining in complexion. He wore a war-cap and a *gati* of the colour of a black pigeon. He carried a sword in hand, and moved about shouting out his orders and instructions.

"Jatichandan Namdayangia Rajkhowa of the Bargohain family, on the hill known as Usha-haran Parvat, with 80 *Chor-bachas*. He was ruddy in complexion; his eyes were copper-coloured; and he was fearful to look at. He wore a war-cap and a buffalo-coloured *gati*. He carried a sword and a bow.

“Chakrapani Matbar Tar-Salaguria Rajkhowa of the Buragohain family, son of Bar Hazarika, from Usha-haran Parvat on the road known as Obhota-simalur Bat, with 80 *Chor-bachas*. He was greyish in complexion. He walked through his *pali* with swift pace. He carried a sword, a bow and a thick club.

“The following commanders guarded the waters of the Brahmaputra on the south bank:

“Namdangia Rajkhowa was in charge of the stockades erected on the river. He had under him 104 sets of watchmen and sailors.

“Chetai Pani-Salaguria Rajkhowa, son of Tangachu, with 80 *Chor-bachas*.

“Tangachu Dikhowmukhia Rajkhowa, with 80 *Chor-bachas*.

“Kalanchu Sandikoi Neog, with 80 *Chor-bachas*.

“**On the north bank:** The Prime Minister Bahgaria Atan Buragohain Rajmantri Dangaria was personally in charge of the command on the north bank of Gauhati. His camp was situated at Lathia Parvat, and he had with him 80 *Chor-bachas*. The Buragohain was tall in stature, and his strides resembled the steps of a goose. His face was broad and he had two moles on his forehead. He was ruddy in complexion. He wore a buffalo-coloured *gati*, and carried a big sword in his hand.

“Sen Gohain Bar-Abhaypuria Rajkhowa of the Bargohain family, was in charge of the *pali* from Juria to Sarai, with 80 *Chor-bachas*. He was tall in stature, ruddy in complexion, loud and resonant in his voice, quick in his pace, and fearful to look at. He wore a black *gati*, and a war-cap; and carried a *dao*, a bow and a spear.

“Manju-Abhaypuria Rajkhowa, the nephew of Phul Barua, was encamped in front of Sarai with jurisdiction

extending up to Kekuri. He had with him 80 *Chor-bachas*. He was slim in size and handsome in appearance. He wore a buffalo-coloured *gati*, and a war-cap; and carried a sword, a bow, two torches and two *chaks*. He used to move swiftly in his *pali*. He had reddish hair and eyes. While moving to and fro he betrayed an attitude of grim defiance of the enemy.

"Haribar Saru-Abhoypuria Rajkhowa of the Lankamkharu family, from Kekuri to Lathia Parvat. He was slightly squint-eyed. He moved about swiftly in his *pali*.

"Miri-Sandikoi Phukan, from Lathia to Chila Parvat, with 100 *Chor-bachas*. He was in charge of both Bar Chila Parvat and Saru Chila Parvat. He was dark in complexion, had reddish eyes, and was very swift in pace. He did not like to remain still and quiet in any particular spot, and wanted to be constantly on foot. He was fearful to look at. He carried a sword and a bow, and wore a *gati*.

"Hazarika Barua guarded one portion of Saru Chila Parvat, and Neog Barua the remaining part. Each of them had 50 *Chor-bachas*. They both looked fearful, and moved about swiftly with swords uplifted. They carried bows on their sides.

"Sarujana Duara Lechai Tarua-Dihingia Rajkhowa, from Chila Parvat to Sindhurighopa as far as the road known as Khara-garua Ali with 120 *Chor-bachas*. He moved about on foot with the gravity of an elephant. He was ruddy in complexion, and had a broad chest and a slender waist. He carried a *dao* in his hand and bow on his side, and wore a war-cap.

"Charingia Pelan Phukan, from Khara-garua Ali to Rangmahal, with 120 *Chor-bachas*. His arms and feet were short and stout. He was greyish in complexion and was

fearful to look at. He carried a *dao*, a bow and a shield, and wore a buffalo-coloured *gati* and a circular cap.

“Dhawa Gohain Gajpuria Rajkhowa, from Rangmahal to Adamar Sil, with 100 *Chor-bachas*. He was short and small in stature. He carried a sword and a spear; and wore a war-cap and buffalo-coloured *gati*.

“Moran Gohain, the brother of the king, from Adamar Sil to Kanai-barasi-boa Sil, with 80 *Chor-bachas*.

“Rup Sandikai, also known as Sadiya-khowa, from Kanai-barasi-boa Sil to Shahburuz, with 100 *Chor-bachas*.

“Baghchowal Barpatra Gohain, at Kurua, with 120 *Chor-bachas*. He was ruddy in complexion, and he made himself felt wherever he went. He carried only a sword in his hand. His *pali* was situated in a low-lying land.

“The elder brother of the Raidangia Phukan, near the *pali* of the Barpatra Gohain, with 80 *Chor-bachas*. He was very handsome in appearance.

“The waters on the north bank of the Brahmaputra were guarded by Pani-Dihingia Rajkhowa, nephew of the Dihingia Phukan, with 80 *Chor-bachas*; and Buragohain Phukan with 100 *Chor-bachas*.

“The following officers were also entrusted with important commands on both the banks, but their *palis* cannot now be ascertained with any degree of accuracy: Kamalakanta Abhaypuria Rajkhowa of the Bargohain family; Haladhar Duara, son of Phul Barua: Dayangia Rajkhowa, son of Luthuri; Chaudang Barua of Papang family; Raidangia Phukan; Cheregual Phukan; and Dihingia Phukan.” (106)

The meticulous planning and placements in the 25 mile wide fortifications testified to the acumen and ability of Lachit Barphukan the strategist. It was a signal example of a General utilizing his knowledge of the terrain and existing

natural features to create a perfect defensive structure which an inimical land army, no matter how mighty, would find near impossible to breach. The Premier, Atan Buragohain, a warrior-statesman of long experience, offered valuable suggestions. Lachit's greatest asset was that his mind was receptive to advice of merit, as also logical criticism, and implement his plan accordingly. The war-council met regularly and the defensive measures were discussed and debated upon each day.

Despite having an open mind to suggestions, everyone understood that Lachit too was a stern, almost ruthless disciplinarian, and would brook no dereliction of duty. He warned his officers that anyone discovered neglecting the task assigned to him, or discovered to be absent from his designated spot, would face his wrath, something that was communicated to the lowest rank and file of the soldiers. The work on finishing the defensive structure went on day and night. No matter that the enemy was not yet within sight, absolute alertness was a must.

Indeed, dark clouds were gathering on the distant horizon. The dogs of war would soon be let loose!





THE MUGHAL RESPONSE

“The news of the defeat of Firoz Khan, and of the loss of Gauhati, reached Aurangzeb in December, 1667. He at once resolved to wipe out the disgrace and, with this object in mind, appointed Raja Ram Singha to the command of an imperial army, which was to be strengthened by troops of the Bengal command. He was accompanied by Rashid Khan, the late Thaana of Gauhati. Some time was taken up in collecting and transporting his army, which consisted of 18,000 cavalry and 30,000 infantry, with 15000 archers from Koch Behar; and he did not reach Rangamati until February, 1669.” ⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

In at least one way the choice of Ram Singha to lead the Mughal Army against the Assamese was similar to Emperor Aurangzeb's choice of Mir Jumla to proceed against the Ahom monarch Jaydhwaj Singha. It may be recalled that the cunning Emperor had dispatched the powerful Mir Jumla with the surreptitious hope that the evil reputation of Assam as a land from which no foreigner returns would be proven true, and that land would see the end of his potential rival. That hope had been fulfilled and Assam had indeed killed Mir Jumla!

In selecting Ram Singha, the son of Mirza-Raja Jai Singha of Amber, Aurangzeb had secretly hoped that the campaign would see an end of that proud Rajput prince too. It was to be a punishment for the former's alleged connivance at helping the famous Maratha warrior Chatrapati Shivaji and his son while they had been held prisoners in Agra. The story of how Shivaji escaped from Agra forms one of the most riveting legends of Mughal India. In May, 1666, Shivaji and his nine year old son Sambhaji, on invitation from Aurangzeb, visited the Mughal court and were arrested and imprisoned at Agra. It is said that the Maratha warrior and his son effected their escape from custody by hiding in fruit baskets! Aurangzeb knew that they could not have carried out such a daring escapade without help from outside and suspected Raja Ram Singha being an accomplice in the act, his suspicions being fed by allegations of the Rajput Commander's rivals.

Those allegations had resulted in Raja Ram Singha being deprived of his *mansabdar* or rank as a commander and the privilege of being able to sit in the Mughal court. His proud father Jai Singha, of the famous Kuchchwa clan of Amber, who was renowned as a warrior throughout India and had rendered distinguished service to the Mughals, was devastated by the news of his son's disgrace and died soon afterwards on July 2, 1667. After his death, Ram Singha was again taken back by the Emperor, was appointed as a Charhazari, restored his former privileges, and invested with the task of teaching the upstart Assamese a lesson.

Reportedly, Ram Singha's mother and wives were alarmed at his appointment, and asked him to consult with the Sikh Guru Teg Bahadur. "As advised by them, Ram Singha visited Guru Teg Bahadur in the company of his

Ministers and a large retinue of soldiers. 'My mother and the queens,' said Ram Singha to the Guru, 'asked me if I desired an untimely death. They represented that there was none so brave as Mir Jumla, and if he perished what hope was there for me? Of all the Generals who had been on that errand none except Raja Man Singha had ever returned. Then I too saw the danger of my position. It was certain death to command the invading army, and it would be equally fatal for me to disobey the Emperor's orders.' Guru Teg Bahadur asked Ram Singha to have faith in God." (108)

"Guru Nanak," he said, "will assist thee, and thou shall conquer Kamrup." The Guru offered to accompany Ram Singha to Assam. ⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

As a token of his appointment, on December 27, 1667, A *Khelat* was presented to Ram Singha by Aurangzeb consisting of a gilded saddle and a dagger with a belt adorned with pearls. ⁽¹¹⁰⁾

On January 6, 1668, Ram Singha received the formal order of his appointment as the Commander-in-Chief of the Mughal army being readied to proceed against the Ahom king of Assam. He was informed through the Prime Minister Jafar Khan Umdat-ul-Mulk that he would be provided with supply of provisions for the troops and more troops would be made available to him in course of time. ⁽¹¹¹⁾

The royal *farman* handed over to him Jafar Khan read: "King of Amber and son of Mirja Raja Jai Singha, Ram Singha Charhazari, has been appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial army for the conquest of Assam. He has at his disposal twenty one Rajput Chiefs, four thousand troops under his own payroll, fifteen hundred *Ahadis* (gentlemen-troopers) and five hundred artillery men. His deputies in the expedition are Raja Indramani,

Chadmend Khan with two thousand five hundred men, Alam Khan Duihazari, Bakram Khan Duihazari, Dewan Sayid Gazap Khan Ekhazari, Kayam Khan, Zulel Beg, Raja Prithu, Raja Manik, Mir Gazraf Khan Beldari with his 2,500 men, Nasiri Khan, Kirat Khan Bhurtiah, Raghunath Singha of Mirthah and Bairam Deo Sisodia. A huge reinforcement is being arranged by the Governor of Bengal, Shaista Khan, and the combination of both the forces would be invincible.” (112)

The wisdom of Aurangzeb in sending a disaffected Rajput Raja at the head of a powerful army might be questionable, but the wily Emperor was convinced that, as in the case of Mir Jumla, a potential needle in the flesh would be better placed far from Delhi, rather than be allowed to remain close to home. However, he took the precaution of personally placing several Mughal officers, such as Mira Said Saif Dewan, Mir Raji Dewan, Bahlol Khan Daroga of 700 *Jasols*, Sultan Ali Daroga of 300 *Ahadis* and Mir Gaar Beg Hazi Waqayanavis, to watch and report on the doings of the Rajput Raja, so that he refrains from colluding with the king and officers of Assam. (113)

“Ram Singha was accompanied in his expedition by Nawab Rashid Khan who had been in Assam during Mir Jumla's invasion, and who had served as Faujadar of Gauhati for four years. It was the practice of Emperor Aurangzeb to depute a Muslim officer as the second-in-command when a Hindu was placed in sole charge of an expedition, especially when the enemy himself was a Hindu. It was in pursuance of this policy that Diler Khan Daudzai had been sent with Mirza Raja Jai Singha in the war against Shivaji. Aurangzeb's orders to Rashid Khan ran as follows — ‘Rashid Khan, you are to join the expedition against

Assam. You had been there before with Mazum Khan (Mir Jumla), and you know the language and customs of the people.” (114)

When Ram Singha set out from Delhi in January, 1668, his army was a relatively small one; but with the troops given by the Emperor and the promised reinforcements from Bengal it swelled up to 30,000 infantry, 18,000 Turkish cavalry, and 15,000 Koch archers. The land force was augmented by a flotilla of 40 war boats or *ghurabs* with mounted cannons each capable of carrying fifty to sixty men, each towed by hundreds of *kasahs* or smaller boats rowed by sailors. It is also interesting to note that amongst the Mughal army were hundreds of gigantic hounds trained to tear enemy foot-soldiers into shreds. Apart from the Mughal Commanders who had come with him from Delhi, he was also joined on the way by Commanders from Koch Behar, including Raja Jai Narayan, grandson of Parikshit, Kavisekhar Barua, Sarveswar Barua, Manmath Barua and Ghanashyam Bakshi.

The Ahom *buranjis* as well as the Mughal and Persian chronicles differ as to the size of Ram Singha's army, but contrary to the views of certain historians, it can be definitely envisaged to be a mammoth one since it was setting out on an important campaign and Mughal reputation was at stake.

Ram Singha also brought with him from Patna the Sikh Guru Teg Bahadur, and five Muslim *Pirs* who could combat the black-arts Assam was then notorious for. But the Guru later admitted that he had three objectives in accompanying Ram Singha — as a friend to the Raja, preacher of God's words and averter of bloodshed. Perhaps the association of the Guru during the march to Assam contributed to an extent to the fact that Ram Singha, in

the initial stage of his campaign, tried to avoid bloodshed and sought instead the path of negotiation. The Guru did preach the Sikh religion in all the places he visited, departing from the Rajput Raja's company only after the latter's army had reached Dhubri and made its way towards the Mughal outpost of Ranganadi. The Sikh Guru built the first Gurudwara in Assam at Dhubri on the bank of the Brahmaputra. Known as Gurudwara Damdame, it later became a holy pilgrimage shrine for Sikhs.

During the stay at Dhubri, Guru Teg Bahadur reportedly received the news that a son had been born to him at Patna. This happy event was celebrated with great jubilation in Ram Singha's camp, accompanied by music and firing of guns, and copious distribution of alms. This son was Govinda, who became the Tenth Guru of the Sikhs after Teg Bahadur was executed by Emperor Aurangzeb in 1675. ⁽¹¹⁵⁾

On reaching Dhaka, Ram Singha found himself being greeted warmly by the Governor, Nawab Shaista Khan, who had been a close friend of Mirza Raja Jai Singha. The Nawab was the elder brother of the famed Begum Mumtaz Mahal, the wife of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan. In fact, it had been Jahangir who had awarded the title of Mirza to Shaista Khan in recognition of his family's service and position in the Mughal court. Since Aurangzeb had deposed and imprisoned his father Shah Jahan to wrest the Delhi throne he, naturally enough, was not well disposed towards Shaista Khan.

The Nawab had further alienated Aurangzeb because of his failure to defeat Shivaji, especially after the fiasco at Pune in which Shaista Khan had lost some of his fingers. His appointment to the Governorship of Bengal was in the nature of a punishment posting. He therefore in turn was

none too well disposed towards Aurangzeb and any Commander sent by the Emperor. However, his past friendship with Jai Singha was reason enough for the Nawab not to be inimical towards Ram Singha.

The Nawab promised to help him in any way he could, and immediately sanctioned 2000 additional soldiers from the Bengal command to join Ram Singha's already formidable force. According to an old Assamese *buranji* Shaista Khan secretly hoped that Ram Singha will not succeed in defeating the Assamese, since the continued existence of Assam as a sovereign country will serve to enhance his own status as the Bengal Subedar who had to act as a go-between of the Mughal Empire and an independent State.

Nor was Shaista Khan very optimistic about the success Ram Singha would attain in the objective he had been set, having as he did the precedent of the disaster that overtook Mir Jumla and his ill-fated expedition. According to that same old chronicle Shaista Khan offered the following advice to Ram Singha: "You are to act in a way that you might remain in the good graces of the Emperor who is a clever politician. I have heard that Assam has constructed huge fortifications. I am also told that the Ahoms are shrewd diplomats. Shujanagar (Hajo) is an unhealthy place; its hills are covered with forests, and poisonous waters flow in the streams during the two months Baisakh and Jaistha. The air that blows there is infected with poison. For this reason, our men die there in large numbers, and you should live there very carefully. Do not drink any water except that of the Lauhitya or the Brahmaputra. Do not admit the women of that place in your *mahal*; they are wicked and treacherous. Please write to me when you fall short of food-stuffs, war provisions or

money, and I shall send them to you, looking upon you as one of mine.” (116)

Armed with such reassurance, Ram Singha with his mammoth army set forth towards Assam. He reached the Mughal garrison at Rangamati only in February, 1669, over two years since Aurangzeb had first learnt of the loss of Lower Assam, a period lengthy enough to ensure that the Ahoms could erect a defensive infrastructure which, as events turned out, was absolutely impregnable!

In a *farman* dated 26 February, 1669, Emperor Aurangzeb complimented Raja Ram Singha for having entered Assam and gave him instructions as to what he should further do. The *farman* read: “Know ye, Raja Ram Singha that the Emperor has come to learn from the letter of the *AmirulUmara* (Shaista Khan) that you took leave from him and as a valiant general invaded the territory of the *zamindar* of Assam along with a group of soldiers. This news has pleased the Emperor very much. You should quickly advance to the *thanah* Gauhati and other *thanahs*, where Sayyid Firoz Khan and Sayyid Salar Khan might already have been posted and forcibly remove them and establish perfect and firm control. Thereafter every one of the imperial servants should cooperate and take steps to provide for the safety of the *thanahs* and strive for their protection and custody. And you should know that giving precedence to the performance of this task according to order in the most excellent manner would yield good results in the imperial court.....” (117)





A PROTRACTED CHESS-GAME

As stated earlier, the Assamese military administration under the Ahom monarchs had developed one of the finest spy network to be seen in medieval India. In fact, some of the *chor-bachas* under Lachit Barphukan had been following Ram Singha and his huge army from the moment he departed from Delhi, and relaying information of his progress to the Commander-in-Chief at Gauhati. Thus it was no wonder that Lachit was apprised of the Rajput General's departure from Dhaka and his arrival at Rangamati as soon as these developments took place.

“The leadership of Raja Ram Singha of Amber in an expedition to Assam awakened the Assamese to a consciousness of the necessity for more arduous preparations. The house of Amber, the hereditary supporters of Mughal imperialism, and their military skills and valour were known all over India. Ram Singha's participation did not produce feelings of consternation in the hearts of the Assamese, it only convinced them that the ensuing campaign was going to be a strenuous game as compared with the preceding war of recovery. Thus there ensued a new phase in the Assam-Mughal conflicts, the

defensive war of retaining possession of Gauhati and the territories up to the Manas." (118)

The spies had taken pains to send in minute details the composition of Ram Singha's army. Lachit immediately realized that the regiments placed in the outer boundaries would be no match for the approaching force, and it could be repulsed only at Gauhati. Three courses of action, therefore, had to be immediately adopted. First, the defence structure at Gauhati had to be reinforced further. Second, the small Assamese garrisons stationed at the periphery, which needed to retreat, should be instructed to adopt harassing guerrilla tactics rather than frontal attacks so as to delay the advance of Ram Singha's army, thereby giving himself and lieutenants like Atan Buragohain additional time to strengthen the defences. Such delaying tactics were also needed to ensure that the dreaded Assam monsoon rains arrive to further deter Ram Singha from effective action. Third, a strategy had to be put in place which would gradually entice the Rajput General into the trap laid for him at Gauhati and engage in a river battle rather than one on open ground.

Consequently, the Ahom outposts near river Manas were ordered to engage in skirmishes with the imperial army so as to delay it as much as possible from reaching the primary target of Gauhati. The small detachments, adopting guerrilla hit and run tactics, were easily defeated though they did help to delay the advance. Despite the Ahom garrisons which engaged the imperial army having prior information that the Mughals had brought along with them ferocious war-hounds, they did not fully anticipate the havoc these animals could cause.

"Ram Singha had brought with him 1,000 war hounds, and they used to snatch off our soldiers under the smoke

of gunfire even from the latter's position in the fighting lines. As they did not approach the Assamese lines in packs, they could be killed only one or two at a time." ⁽¹¹⁹⁾

Leaving a small contingent of *mansabdars* at Rangamati to maintain communication with Bengal, Ram Singha advanced along the north bank of the Brahmaputra. As per orders, the detachments at the Assam frontier withdrew from their positions and sailed down towards Gauhati. At the same time Lachit dispatched small detachments under three Rajkhowas to lure the Mughals closer to the river-port. "Ram Singha entered unopposed the waters of Assam, and the absence of resistance on the part of the Assamese was attributed by Ram Singha to their inaction and fear. The detachments of the Rajkhowas sailed up the river remaining within sight of Ram Singha's army; but outside the range of the Mughal's cannons. At night the Rajkhowas encamped on the river banks. Trunks of plantain trees were posted in their camps with a torch on each. Early in the morning the Assamese contingents boarded their boats and resumed their sailing in advance of Ram Singha's fleet, thus giving the impression of the retreat of a vast army. Ram Singha flattered himself by thinking that he was as fortunate as his predecessor Mir Jumla in having an easy march up the river Brahmaputra." ⁽¹²⁰⁾

On the sixth day of Ram Singha's advance from Rangamati, two attendants of the Assamese Commander Dihingia Rajkhowa, who had been asleep, were left behind by mistake in their camp. The duo were captured by the Mughals and produced before Ram Singha. The General ordered them to be released so that they could carry a message back to the Assamese Commander-in-Chief. The message was an old-fashioned challenge to Lachit to have a fight with him for one hour, the implication being that

whoever lost would have to do the opponent's bidding. Lachit, of course, ignored the challenge with the contempt it deserved. ⁽¹²¹⁾

Having purchased some time through adopting stalling tactics, Lachit and Atan Buragohain redoubled their efforts at strengthening the defences by erecting even more earthen ramparts to prevent an attack by land on the Assamese fortifications. The General very well realized that in order to repulse an attack by the Mughal forces and prevent any breach in the defences, it was imperative that every individual entrusted with responsibilities carry them out promptly and in a disciplined way. In order to instil such discipline he announced that he would decapitate anyone who neglected the assigned duties, no matter whether he be a high ranking officer or a common soldier.

"The Assamese General displayed vigilance and circumspection in completing their preparations. The mature deliberations of the war council were committed in writing to form a staff manual. Lachit Barphukan issued an order enforcing discipline. One must steadfastly hold to his charge and perform his assigned duties within the scheduled time on pain of death." ⁽¹²²⁾

Even Atan Buragohain felt a twinge of fear at such a stern announcement; the effect it had on lesser individuals could well be imagined. According to Shan convention only the king himself could order the execution of anyone found guilty, thus Lachit's words were in absolute contravention of Ahom custom and tradition and a challenge to royal authority. The news of the announcement soon reached the ears of Chakradhwaj Singha, who had been following the developments at Gauhati closely on a day to day basis, while he was seated in the court at Garhgaon. The Ahom monarch appreciated the dire situation being confronted

by Lachit and his Assamese forces, but refrained from immediately voicing his opinion since his General had abrogated for himself a prerogative invested only with the royalty. However, his queen bluntly told him that the Barphukan should be allowed full authority if the country, his throne and the Assamese people were to be saved. The king, on his part, quickly articulated his support for Lachit's action, while the messengers were rebuked for having brought the news to him. ⁽¹²³⁾

Little did Lachit imagine that he would have to match his action with his words so soon afterwards! Every night the Barphukan, accompanied by some soldiers, would ride on horseback to carry out impromptu inspection of individuals spots in the defence infrastructure to ensure that everyone was on alert and performing the tasks assigned to them. In order to prevent a surprise assault by land a rampart had to be urgently erected upon the road from Agiyathuri to Gauhati near Amingaon. The officer who had been given the responsibility of constructing that rampart was Lachit's own uncle. Aware of the importance of that rampart, Lachit made a night visit to find out for himself how work on it was progressing. He was infuriated to discover that all the workers as also his uncle were fast asleep even as the rampart remained incomplete.

The noise made by the hooves of the horses of the General's group awoke the officer and the workers. But, rather than apologize for his action, his uncle offered the excuse that the workmen, exhausted from toiling for long at a stretch, needed a break. Legend has it that, on receiving such a nonchalant reply, Lachit uttered the immortalized phrase, "My uncle is not greater than my motherland," and, taking out his *hengdang*, immediately beheaded his uncle!

Lachit's prompt execution galvanized the workers who furiously carried on the construction and completed the rampart before the sun rose the next morning. Since then the place has attained fame as *Momai-kota Garh*, or the rampart where the uncle was executed! On coming to know of this, far from reproving Lachit, the Ahom monarch instead lauded his disciplinarian action. ⁽¹²⁴⁾

There are other anecdotes, some reflected in the Ahom *buranjis*, some merely in Assamese folk-lore, related to the continued endeavour of Lachit and his senior officers to keep up the morale of his troops in the face of the Mughal advance. For instance, it is related that Lachit one night saw a dream in which a tall, stately and fair-complexioned lady, her mouth agape and tongue outstretched, had appeared. The woman's upper-lip touched the sky above her, and the lower-lip hung down to the underworld. Her tongue had been pointed at the Mughals, while the Assamese troops stood behind their Commander.

Lachit summoned the two astrologers attached to his forces by royal decree, Churamoni Doloi and Sarobar Doloi, and the Ahom augur Machai Phukan, to his presence and asked them to interpret the dream. All three unanimously affirmed that it indeed was a propitious dream, signifying a victory for the Assamese forces and the destruction of the Mughal army. The news of the "Barphukan's dream" and the astrologers' interpretation of it soon spread amongst the officers and their men, and served in no little measure to boost the confidence of the Assamese soldiers about the inevitability of their triumph. ⁽¹²⁵⁾

It is also recorded in some *buranjis* that Lachit himself had moments of self-doubt. By April, 1669 the Mughals had reached Sualkuchi on the north bank and encamped. While the huge armada of boats was moored on the river

bank, Ram Singha's soldiers set up camps that sprawled all over the countryside. Though his spies had sent information about the strength of Ram Singha's army, it was imperative for the formulation of his plans that he himself verify it first-hand. With this aim in mind Lachit climbed to the top of a fort along with some soldiers and surveyed the enemy camp. An eye-witness records that at the sight of the mammoth armada and enormous Mughal army tears rolled down the Barphukan's cheeks. He was overwhelmed with a consciousness of his responsibilities and exclaimed: "How will my king be saved? How will my people be saved? How will my posterity be saved?"⁽¹²⁶⁾

It is also mentioned that Lachit overcame such a sense of sorrowful despair in a matter of moments. His heart welled up with renewed resolve to defend his motherland and he dedicated himself once more to the job he was entrusted with by his king.

Having seen for himself the huge size of the enemy force, Lachit understood that he needed to further reinforce some of his defensive structures, including the erection of more stockades in the sands of the Brahmaputra. Moreover, the rainy season was due to arrive soon and it would hamper the Mughals by making communications difficult as they had done in the past during the invasions by Chilarai or Mir Jumla.

Thus, in order to further delay the inevitable conflict, he formulated a crafty plan. He requested Chakradhwaj Singha to temporarily release Syed Firoz Khan, the erstwhile Faujadar of Gauhati, who had been captured in the earlier battle to retake the port-city, and sent as a prisoner to Garhgaon. Khan was to be made an emissary who would shuttle between the Mughal and the Assamese camps. Lachit had no fear that Khan would take this opportunity

to go over to the Mughal side and obtain his freedom — after all, he knew all too well the treatment Aurangzeb meted out to Commanders who had lost their commands and been taken prisoner by the Assamese in the bargain!

On being sent to Gauhati, Syed Firoz Khan was made to carry a letter from Commander-in-Chief Lachit to the Raja questioning his motive for coming to the Ahom kingdom with such a strong and hostile army. The letter also stated that if there was any dispute between Delhi and Garhgaon, it could be settled amicably through peaceful negotiations rather than needless conflict. "Besides, war is not the only method of settling issues," the letter read. "We have four avenues mentioned in the political scriptures — conciliations, gifts, dissension and open rupture. One proves to be a knowing man if he can tune his measures to the exigency of the situation." (127)

Ram Singha belonged to the old school of warriors for whom adherence to the code of warfare was as important as the battle itself. He could not see through the subterfuges of the wily Assamese and took their message seriously. Moreover, his heart was not really into fighting, since he had been made to lead the Mughal army under compulsion. So he saw the letter as a way of achieving his objective without resorting to armed conflict.

"The Raja's methods of warfare were precisely the same as those adopted by Jai Singha (his father) in the campaign against Shivaji. Ram Singha aimed at first to arrive at a settlement with the Assamese by diplomatic negotiations, accompanied by the usual round of oaths, promises and assurances, and backed by ostensible preparations of an armed conflict as an alternative. Persistent attempt was made to corrupt the Assamese Commanders and Ahom nobles by bribery and presents,

and by creating dissension amongst them. But, here in Assam, Rajput strategy met with a complete failure, while it succeeded partially in the operations against the Maratha leader.” (128)

He replied through Firoz Khan that there was no need for war and that his was not an army of conquest. All that the Ahom king needed to do was to get his forces to retreat to Barnadi on the north and Asurar Ali in the south bank, which had been the western limits for his realm by the earlier treaty. Raja Ram Singha even offered to have one hour of “fight” to show both monarchs that force had been used — if the Assamese army did not have sufficient ammunition the Mughals would be all too happy to supply them with the same! “I, Ram Singha, a descendent of Raja Mukunda,” his reply read, “have taken the field in person. The Barphukan is also a man of consequence, being the son of the Barbarua. He should be prepared to give me an hour’s fight. If he is short of war-material, he should ask of me, and I shall concede.” (129)

Lachit’s reply to this letter was a sardonic one: “Well, Firoz Khan, tell my friend the Raja of Amber, that he cites the authority of the treaty between Allah Yar Khan and my father Momai Tamuli Barbarua, yet Kamrup and Gauhati do not belong to the Mughals. We have taken possession of the place by turning out the Koches.” (130) The above claim was based on the fact that the kingdom of Koch Hajo, which included Kamrup and Goalpara, originally formed a part of the Koch kingdom under King Naranarayan, who gave it to his nephew Raghudev, son of Chilarai and father of Parikshit. During the 17th century Koch Hajo passed turn by turn into the hands of the Koches, the Mughals and the Ahoms. The Mughals had occupied it between 1639 and 1658, when the Ahoms captured Gauhati

from them, and then "marched against the Koches and, after a slight check, defeated them twice and drove them across the Sankosh. They thus became the masters of the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley." (131)

"It was through mere chance that it fell into the hands of the Mughals for a few seasons," Lachit's continued. "Now God has been pleased to give it back to us. When He pleases to give it to our brother-sovereign the Mughal Emperor he will then get Gauhati, and not before that. As for his request to give him fight for an hour, I would like to say that we are prepared to fight as long as there remains a drop of blood in our veins. He has also expressed his willingness to give us war-materials. He has come over a long distance undergoing fatigue in his journey, and the provisions may be inadequate for his own purpose. Our Majesty the Heavenly King has nothing unavailable to him. If the Rajput Raja falls short of materials, let him ask me, and I shall try to oblige him." (132)

The tone may have been sardonic, but the words carried ambiguous connotations and evaded a direct response to Ram Singha's demand that Lachit hand over Lower Assam to him. Thus the reply brought about no peaceful resolution to the issue, something desired by the reluctant Rajput Raja but not by the resolute Assamese. The time taken for the back and forth dispatch of the messages served Lachit and his men well, enabling them to complete the remaining steps to the strengthening of the defence preparations.

As for the emissary Syed Firoz Khan, the various Ahom *buranjis* differ about his ultimate fate. Some hold that after his return to the Assamese camp with the final message he was arrested once again, and sent as a prisoner to Latasil and then to Kaliabar. (133)

In a transparent attempt to flex his muscles, overawe the Assamese soldiers and destroy their morale, Ram Singha with his vast army, having already occupied the territory west of Manas and captured two Assamese outposts at Chenga and Tapera, pressed closer to Gauhati, with his formidable fleet mooring at Hajo and the soldiers encamping there. Hajo was barely 14 miles from Gauhati, and the looming threat now assumed overwhelming dimensions. Yet, far from cowing down Lachit and his men, it made them even more determined to resist the invaders.

Meanwhile, the moves and countermoves on this protracted game of chess, both on the physical and mental level, continued! Ram Singha sent a bag of poppy-seeds to Lachit's camp, along with another message which read: "The Barphukan should evacuate Gauhati. Our army is as numerous as the poppy-seeds in this bag." However, by then Lachit and Atan had completed their defensive measures; they could now assert that they would rather fight than yield an inch of territory which they had wrested from the Koches. They also sent a bamboo-tube filled with sand to denote the numbers of their own army! The "gift" was accompanied by a letter which said: "The poppy-seeds if pounded down will become a thin paste. Our army is as numerous and indissoluble as the sands in this bamboo-tube." (134)

An anecdote has it that the bamboo-tube and the message were carried by two Assamese envoys Nim and Ramcharan. Ram Singha, to rouse a sense of wonder in the envoys, contrived to have a number of wooden birds fly overhead in his audience chamber. Ramcharan pleaded that he be given one such bird and was given two. Lachit not only reprimanded Ramcharan for such suppliant behaviour in the camp of the enemy, but also put him in

fetters to be shown to the soldiers. Nim was quick to state that never in the future should he be sent to a foreign court in the company of such a covetous man!

Another anecdote holds that Hangalbhanga Laskar, an Assamese traveller who had stayed for some time in Ram Singha's encampment, was apprehended by the Assamese soldiers when he was on his way to Gauhati to visit Rajendra Chakravarty of Kulhati, near Hajo, then staying in the Barphukan's camp as a priest and well-wisher. His captors took him to Lachit, and he divulged vital information before the Commander-in-Chief regarding the internal goings on in the Mughal camp. According to him, the Mughals were dismayed at the sight of the heavy fortifications erected by the Assamese. Ram Singha, according to the Laskar, told his Lieutenant Rashid Khan: "Forts have been constructed by the Assamese on tops of hills, and the outlying plains are also too narrow for the purpose of an open engagement. It is for this reason that the Assamese had proved invincible in their wars against foreigners. The fortifications are intricate and complex, and to each fort there are three passages. The enemy is beyond the reach of our heavy artillery; and there is no opportunity for fighting with arrows and guns. Their Ministers, Commanders and infantry are all to be admired for having constructed such an impregnable wall of defence."

Prime Minister Atan Buragohain Rajmantri Dangariya duly conveyed the Laskar's revelations to the Assamese officers and soldiers. "You are to note carefully," he told them, "that at the sight of our fortifications demoralisation has already started in the enemy's camp. His enthusiasm is already on the wane." To this he got the following response from his officers and men: "The Barphukan should only remain inviolate in his command, and we shall fight to the last drop of our blood." (135)

The information received from the Laskar was indeed true, for all was not well in the Mughal camp, one primary cause being the friction developing between the Rajput Commander-in-Chief Raja Ram Singha and his Lieutenant Rashid Khan. No matter that in March 1669, on the occasion of the Emperor's birthday, the latter had raised the rank of Ram Singha even higher to that of a Panchhazari, the erstwhile Faujadar of Gauhati Rashid Khan continued to insist that his privileges were equal to that of the Rajput Raja, and blew his *Nahbat* as many times and in the same manner as the Commander-in-Chief. Ram Singha took objection to this, asserting that some distinction must be made between the Commander-in-Chief and his subordinates, one of these being Rashid Khan. To this Rashid Khan replied that both of them had been dispatched by the Emperor Aurangzeb to battle the Assamese and take back usurped land, so there should not be any distinction in the privileges each of them enjoyed! ⁽¹³⁶⁾

Things took a drastic turn for the worse when Ram Singha, growing more aware that his adversary Lachit was stalling in order to gain time, began a systematic campaign to breach the Assamese defences. On April 3, 1669 CE Ram Singha led a contingent of his troops to Agiyathuri on the bank of the Brahmaputra River, while Rashid Khan pitched his tent facing the Ahom fort at Amingaon. The Ahoms resisted the Mughal advance, cannon fire and arrows were exchanged by both sides; a cannon ball, in fact, made a breach in Ram Singha's tent while the Rajput Raja's nephew was killed by an arrow.

But the battle ended without any decisive result for both sides. In the evening Ram Singha invited Rashid Khan to his tent to discuss the situation and their plan of action for the next day. Rashid Khan was enjoying a dance and

music performance and did not respond to his General's summons. To make matters worse, Rashid Khan sent a friendly letter to the Ahom Commander Miri Sandikai. The proud Rajput could not tolerate Rashid Khan's impertinence any longer. Marching up to Rashid Khan's tent, he cut the ropes holding it up. Sensing the rage in the Rajput Raja, Rashid Khan deemed discretion to be the better part of valour, and retreated with his contingent away from the river, temporarily halting at Dalibari, and then making a final retreat to Hajo. Ram Singha attributed Rashid Khan's desertion to a possible collusion with the Assamese and informed Aurangzeb of the same.

Despite the desertion of his second in command, Raja Ram Singha now continued with his assaults on various points of the Assamese fortifications. He divided his forces into four divisions, each of them being invested with the onerous task of finding a loophole in the literary watertight Assamese defences at four different spots of the extensive fortifications. The fleet moored on the Brahmaputra River had an artillery deployment under naval Commanders comprising Mansur Khan, Latif Khan, Rasip Khan, someone called the Kapidan Raja and a few *firanghees* or foreigners from Britain and Portugal. A force was stationed on the south bank commanded by Ali-akbar Khan, Mir Syed Khan, Raja Indramani, Raja Jaynarain and Marul Khan Sardar. Ram Singha himself was placed in front of the Assamese fortifications on the north bank. The formidable force, which included an infantry battalion armed with swords and shields and no less than 15,000 Koch archers, posted at the Sindurighopa entrance was under Jahir Beg, Kayam Khan, Ghansyam Bakshi, and the three Baruas of Koch Behar — Kavisekhar, Sarveswar and Manmath. Apart from the force led by Ram Singha, the

three others do not appear to have engaged in any sort of significant offensive action.

Ram Singha is reported to have used an ingenious means of making an assault on the fortification at Amingaon, having his soldiers dig a tunnel to get into it. But his ploy was discovered and the Assamese defenders flooded the tunnel with water, thereby making it impassable. He persisted with the assault, bombarding the fort at Rangaliburuz near Pandu with cannon-fire and breaching its wall at several places. But the expert engineers among the defenders, having in reserve men and material for just such an eventuality, quickly repaired these breaches, making it impossible for the Mughals to enter the fort. On the contrary, they rained down cannon-fire on their adversary, forcing Raja Ram Singh to retreat to the position from where he had advanced.

The vassal Raja of Rani had been helping the Ahom Commanders at Rangaliburuz; during that skirmish he had captured some of the Mughal soldiers involved in the assault, and these prisoners had their fingers chopped off, before being sent to Lachit Barphukan. The latter dispatched the Mughal captives to Garhgaon and King Chakradhwaj Singha who suitably rewarded the Raja of Rani with gifts. ⁽¹³⁷⁾

In June 1669 a Mughal force under Raja Sujan Singha and Raja Rupnarayan attempted to break through the Assamese defences at Kaljor Hill. Miri Sandikai Phukan, who was the Commander at that spot promptly put up more stockades and a nine-day long battle ensued, without the Mughals being able to effect a breach.

“But the effect of the Barphukan’s astute diplomacy was soon discernible on the subsequent course of events,”

The Comprehensive History of Assam edited by H. K.

Barpujari succinctly sums up the various assaults made by the four divisions of the Mughals at various points of the Ahom defences in the initial stage of their campaign. "Ram Singha's advance was perceptibly slowed down. In the *Uttarkul* as he pressed forward from Jogighopa to Hajo and thence nearer the Assamese fortifications to the sands of Koolhati and Sualkuchi he had to face stiffening opposition. The sieges of Agiathuri, Rangmahal and Saraighat were either prolonged or indecisive. The General himself pressed the siege of Agiathuri about April 3, 1669.....The result was indecisive. Entrusting the siege of Agiathuri to some of his lieutenants the General advanced in triumph to Saraighat fort of the Assamese (where Rashid Khan had already been deputed) and entrenched at a distance of a cannon shot from the Assamese fort. Setting up two forts, he besieged Saraighat. But the Mughal cause was weakened by the insubordination of Rashid Khan, a *mansabdar* of 3000, as he was expelled from the camp for his suspected treasonable collusion with the enemy. Moreover, the two Mughal forts were countered by two Assamese forts set up by Dihingia Bargohain. The Mughals were completely encircled by the Assamese. Without being perturbed, Ram Singha himself sought to advance towards Amingaon by digging underground passage, but the Assamese filled the surrounding moat with water. Then Ram Singha's cannonade from guns mounted on temporary platforms caused breaches in walls; these were repaired immediately. The General, however, had to retreat on account of the counter-cannonade of the Assamese. The Mughal besiegers of Rangmahal, the frontier post (under Ram Singha himself), reeled before the vigorous charge of the entire defending garrison dashing out of the fort and had to retreat to Hajo. Similarly, the besiegers of the

Assamese fort at Akur Ali were wholly surrounded and had to retreat to Pandu. However, the Mughals attacked Huramati fort (then under the Guimelia Bargohain.

“In *Dakhinkul* too the Assamese continued their aggressive activities. Two Hazarikas inflicted losses on the Mughals in man-power, guns and shields. A contingent deputed by the Buragohain, accompanied by the Barphukan, plundered and occupied the Mughal fort at Phrenbar. Ram Singha at first commissioned two Rajas, Indradaman and Jainarayan (grandson of Raja Parikshit) along with Sayyid Mira to seize the Assamese outposts, with the Mughal fleet, (under Iswarpati, the *firangis* or Europeans and one Amir) standing by for succour. The two Rajas occupied Luthuri, built their own stockades at Phrenbar and invested Pandu. In their naval battle against the Assamese they lost two ships. This necessitated the advance of the Mughal General himself to the south. The Mughals could make a breach at Rangaliburuz near it on the fifth day. But, thanks to the prompt report of the ever vigilant Raja of Rani and the state of preparedness of the Assamese, the local Commander Luthuri Chetia Rajkhowa had it repaired quickly to amaze the Mughals. Twenty four Mughal cavaliers advanced from the forts Luthuri and Thangdia to plunder the Assamese and were opposed by an Assamese party that was joined by the Buragohain. The Mughals then resorted to an artillery battle. The *Ahom Buranji* describes it as a ‘terrible battle.’ It proved to be a disaster for the Mughals, who had to retreat.” ⁽¹³⁸⁾

In the meantime, the monsoons had arrived, tilting the balance in favour of the Assamese. In May-June, at Kaljor Hill near Jaistha the Mughals led by Raja Sujan Singha and Raja Rup Narayan were defeated by Miri Sandiqui Phukan in a battle and had to retreat. After

numerous such ineffective engagements, Raja Ram Singha next attempted to circle widely around the well-fortified port-city of Gauhati and attack the Assamese forces through Darrang. With this in mind, a strong force of 2000 cavalrymen, 200 infantry and 200 musketeers was sent under Bahlol Khan, Pranandarayan, Kavisekha Barua and Raja Sura Singha towards the Bahbari or Bahgora fort at the mouth of the Barnadi River opposite Gauhati. But the Raja of Rani had been keeping watch for just such a move, and promptly alerted Lachit Barphukan. The latter advised the Raja to himself abort that attempt; the Raja selected a narrow pass through two hills to ambush the Mughal contingent, putting it to rout with heavy losses, both of men and war-provisions. The hill tribes of Dimarua also joined hands with the Raja of Rani in resisting the Mughals. The naval force of Ram Singha under Mansur Khan too confronted repeated defeats. The ill-fated attempt to circle around Gauhati was thereby effectively frustrated by the Raja of Rani and the Mughals attempted such manoeuvres no more. ⁽¹³⁹⁾

However, it emboldened a section of the Assamese defenders, who had so far been engaged mostly in defensive measures, to venture out and go on the offensive. A contingent under the command of Dihingia Phukan on war-boats attacked the Mughals both on land and water near the Sessa River close to Agiyathuri. In the initial stage the Assamese appeared to have attained victory and pushed back the Mughals from their position, capturing a large number of soldiers as well as a large quantity of their provisions. But then, when Ram Singha personally took to the field with reinforcements, he inflicted a crushing defeat on the land force of the Assamese attackers, forcing them to jump into the Brahmaputra, where they were pursued

and a large number of them were slain. Several Assamese war-boats were captured by the Mughals. The Assamese Commanders were forced to return to the safety of their fortification. The king, learning of the defeat, ordered the Barphukan to attack the enemy again and recover the vessels, but there is no record to show whether this was actually attempted.

Lachit Barphukan, the strategist, had fully understood the danger of trying to attack the vast enemy force head on until an opportune moment arrived. Thus, so far he had been content to remain within the safety of their fortified positions, leaving it to the Mughals to attack however they could, thereby exhaust their resources. He himself had not ordered any aggressive actions on the part of his army, adopting instead a defensive posture, waiting for the monsoons which might, apart from inconveniencing Ram Singha, as in the case of Mir Jumla, cause pestilence to break out in the Mughal camp. The heavy rains during the monsoons would also prevent Ram Singha from summoning reinforcements from Dhaka since the swollen river would hinder such an essay. On the other hand, his own line of communication to Upper Assam had remained open throughout and there was little danger of these being cut off by the coming of the monsoons. The futile assault by the contingent led by the Dihingia Phukan reinforced the wisdom behind Lachit's strategy. Indeed, demoralization was setting in among the Mughals as they were frustrated at the repeated failure of the attacks they had attempted at various points of the battle front.

This demoralization indeed intensified further when, by June that year the monsoons arrived in right earnest; day after day the heavens poured down on the Brahmaputra

Valley, giving Ram Singha a taste of what his predecessor Mir Jumla had encountered. With the ground becoming slushy and all traces of roads obliterated, the enemy's camps became detached from each other, some even being flooded out by the swelling waters of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, and also the various water-bodies that dotted the terrain of the area. Far from being able to continue their advance, the Mughal soldiers had to remain stuck to their camps, wet, muddy and miserable, with nothing much to do in the way of entertainment.

It was then that Lachit Barphukan, taking a cue from what the Assamese had done when Mir Jumla and his army were stuck at Garhgaon, began his *daga-juddah* tactics, corresponding to guerrilla warfare of modern times, of harassing the Mughal army by using hit and run tactics. They used the most ingenuous means of harassment, including playing on the fears of the Mughal soldiers that Assam was the land of sorcery and black-magic! ⁽¹⁴⁰⁾



"The eyes of the sentry at the riverside post of the Mughal encampment popped open. He wanted to yell out a warning, but no sound emerged from his throat.

"The river-bank was filled with dancing skeletons!

"There were hundreds of them on the small stretch of land separating the waters from the perimeter of the camp, their skulls and bones glowing weirdly in the dark. Then they began to wail, a prolonged, terrible keen that chilled the heart. Others too heard that dreadful noise and joined the sentry in watching the devilish dance of the dead. So paralysed were they with fear that they did not even consider attacking the skeletal force with bared swords!

They simply gaped at the spectacle, convinced that the rumours they had heard about Assam being a land of sorcery were absolutely true.

“One of them turned his eyes away and ran to a camp to alert his superior. Soon that section of the camp grew alive with voices shouting out commands and men holding aloft lighted flares. At that precise moment, as if by magic, the dancing skeletons disappeared.

“It had been, of course, a trick played by the wily Ahoms to further demoralize the Mughal soldiers. The ‘skeletons’ were men from an Ahom group which had been hiding on top of a hillock. The Ahoms had many such secret groups hidden at strategic places, to observe enemy movement, launch surprise attacks, or play pranks like the one just witnessed by the Mughal sentries.

“Two dozen of these men in four sloops had rowed their way to that point in the river. The night had been carefully chosen. Being moonless, with a cloud covering the sky, it was pitch-dark. Scrambling on to the river-bank the group had donned on black shirts, pyjamas, and caps on which skulls, rib-cages and bones had been drawn with luminous paint made from secret but natural ingredients known only to the Ahom priests. It had been an awe-inspiring, convincing performance — however, the flares and burst of activity within the camp alerted the group that the show should be concluded! Turning their backs to the camp, the men had taken off the clothes, which caused the skeletons to mysteriously vanish. Moments later they were in their boats and rowing swiftly away to their hideouts.”⁽¹⁴¹⁾



A *farman*, dated August 3, 1669, sent by Emperor Aurangzeb to Ram Singha, expressed his dissatisfaction at the fact that the latter had failed to send a report of the

progress being made in the campaign, and that he had come to know of the recurrent failure of the Mughals only indirectly through Wajir Jafar Khan. The *farman*, at the same time, appreciated the honest efforts being made by the General to capture Gauhati, yet reflected his displeasure at the slowness of the campaign. He also informed Ram Singha that he would be making arrangements to augment the General's resources once the rains ceased, and send provisions along with men, animals, materials, cannons, ammunition, and weapons of war which would be despatched by Shaista Khan from Dhaka with Muzaffar Khan, the Superintendent of boats, and Jalaluddin, the Superintendent of artillery. He also advised Ram Singha to stay with the army at a suitable place near Gauhati fort till the end of the rains and floods, and then press on its capture with "full exertion and unbending endeavour." (142)

At the same time, the Ahom monarch Chakradhwaj Singha too was aggrieved at the absence of a telling blow on the Mughals. He urged Lachit and Atan Buragohain to launch a decisive strike on land and water. In consequence, Dihingia Phukan, Saringia Phukan and Guimelia Bargohain Phukan, under direct command of the Buragohain, constructed a fort at Agiathuri close to the Mughal fort. Lachit himself, along with Kaliabarua Phukan, erected another at Elamung, north of Gauhati. Alarmed at these apparently offensive moves, the Mughals attacked both with their land army and naval fleet. Three Rajkhowas repulsed them on land, while Atan Buragohain did the same on water, both inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy and inducing them to retreat from the three stockades they had set up at Banpinka. (143)

While the Buragohain achieved some success, the force

commanded by Lachit had mixed outcomes. Troops commanded by Lacham Abhoypuria Rajkhowa, Nadarden, Dihingia Phukan and some Rajkhowas, backed by a naval force under Dihingia Phukan which had based itself at Sessa, and another fleet under the Barphukan himself, went on the offensive against the encamped Mughal force. This coordinated attack resulted in heavy losses to the enemy; a large number of Mughal soldiers were captured while many were massacred at Agiathuri, and horses, domestic animals and articles were seized. However, at that point of time Ram Singha backed by a strong land force and ships entered the fray, and the tide of this skirmish turned in favour of the Mughals. The Assamese land army, including Maran Hazarika, the grandson of the Bargohain, was massacred by the Mughals. Nadarden under Lachit tried to save the situation, but superior naval firepower forced the Assamese ships to retreat on the Sessa River, resulting in the loss of several of these. Lachit had to fall back to the Nangken fort. When the news of these reverses reached Chakradhwaj Singha, the Ahom monarch reprimanded Lachit and threatened that he would inflict punishment if "my army was killed without fighting" and if anyone "refrained willingly from fighting." In his response to such a message, Lachit pointed out to the king that, despite his lack of naval resources, his forces had killed many soldiers of the enemy and many prisoners and much spoils had been sent to Garhgaon. Thus, judging from Lachit's ever loyal service, the king's assessment of his conduct must be considered to be over hasty. To his credit, Chakradhwaj Singha conceded Lachit's rebuttal as justified. ⁽¹⁴⁴⁾

The monsoons ceased. Lachit's tactic of using hit and run attacks on Mughal encampments, though serving to

lower the morale of the enemy soldiers, could not effect a telling, decisive blow against the invaders — after all, Raja Ram Singha's army was too vast and formidable for that! His naval fleet too had not been damaged to any significant extent.

At the same time, Lachit's adversary, beaten by the sheer cleverness of the defensive structure he had erected, had refrained from launching an all-out assault against the Assamese, and embarked on limited engagements at breaching the defences. "After the rains the Mughals resumed their activities but these proved to be futile. They lost a double engagement near Sindurighopa. They failed to blow up the enemy fort of Pandu by mine on account of the alertness of the Commander who had the dismantled portion repaired quickly. The Assamese not only foiled a Mughal attempt to destroy Saraighat force but also demolished four Mughal stockades, captured a half-completed fort near Lathia, and seized munitions and a few prisoners." (145)

The outcome was that, even as the days went by, it continued to be a protracted chess-game, punctuated with sporadic engagements and proposals for negotiations to end the hostilities. The Ahom *buranjis*, as also to some extent the Mughal chronicles, are replete with narrations of these various skirmishes, though the descriptions do not always match.

On one occasion the Mughal army attacked the Rangmahal fort on the north bank which was commanded by the officer Pani-Dihingia Rajkhowa Buragohain Phukan, generally known as Gohain-Phukan. Their soldiers tried to camouflage themselves by attaching tall screen-plates tied to the legs of their horses; when they were near enough to the Assamese soldiers they would emerge from behind

the shields to engage in hand-to-hand combat. At the initial stage, such a subterfuge was reported to have worked, and the Assamese force under the Gohain-Phukan suffered a reverse, losing two Captains, the sons of Ghora Sandikai and Anantarai.

Gohain-Phukan countered this strategy by changing the formation of his phalanxes. The outer rows of each column were buffered by elephants having screened *howdahs* which concealed soldiers wielding spears, musketeers and archers, while behind the files marched ordinary soldiers dressed in black. With the newly formed Assamese phalanxes providing an impenetrable wall, the enemy could not make much headway and finally had to withdraw with heavy losses. Ram Singha, who had been watching his Commander's attempt from a safe distance is reported to have proposed to Bhaktadah, an Assamese envoy, that he would like to have a glimpse of Gohain-Phukan in person. The officers reply is reported to have been: "Instead of me, I shall show him twenty thousand of my stalwarts who shall pound the Raja's soldiers to thin paste!" (146)



The Assamese forces supplemented the few open encounters by continuing the guerrilla tactics they were famous for, the opportunity for which was provided by the thickly wooded terrain and hill tops, where they could conceal themselves and attack the Mughal detachments when least expected. There was nothing "gentlemanly" in these nocturnal attacks; these were savage, all out affairs contradicting every "code of war-conduct" a warrior of the old school like Raja Ram Singha had thought he was adhering to! The Assamese soldiers would emerge from

concealment at night and assault enemy camps and inflict as much damage as they could, and then retreat into hiding the very moment the adversary gathered their wits and began employing repulsing measures. Their advantage lay in that they were very familiar with the terrain which enabled them to move about freely in the darkness and engage in night assaults, which the Mughal soldiers were loath to do.



“The very same night, taking advantage of the darkness and the river-mist, a group of Ahom warriors silently slid into the enemy camp. Their padded feet made no noise as they slid ghost-like through gaps in the look-out posts and entered tents where soldiers slept. Knives sliced through throats and the smell of warm human blood filled the tents.

“Just three tents, nine cavalry soldiers — a token attack, to show how easy it was for the Ahoms to slip into the enemy encampments! Their job done, the group left the camp as silent and unseen as they had entered, making swift escape on their boats.” (147)



“The Premier Atan alias Rukma Buragohain Dangoria who commanded the northern division of the Assamese army from his base at Lathia fort, initiated a campaign of harassing the Mughals by employing Lai, Lechai, Chili, Mahi, Mari, Achor, Timai, Baduli, and other spies (in all likelihood *chor-bachas*) who entered into the enemy’s camps at night and removed therefrom their treasures and

money. The Mughal commanders used to sleep in the evening after their meals and the customary dose of *bhang* and *dhatūra*. Lying on their beds they used to puff at the long pipes attached to their *hookahs*. When they fell asleep the *khitmatgars* or attendants removed the pipes from their mouths, lay them around the *hookahs* and themselves retired to sleep in a different place. The cessation of the sound of the *hookahs* was a signal to the eavesdropping spies to enter into the tents, and remove the bags of money. They also purloined the silver *hookahs* used by the Nawabs. While leading the horses with the stolen bags the Assamese spies were occasionally sighted by the enemy, but they rode post-haste to their camps eluding the pursuing Mughals.” ⁽¹⁴⁸⁾



Raja Ram Singha, it is said, sent an emissary with a letter to Lachit Barphukan to convey his contemptuous anger at such tactics being adopted by the latter. “Do you know what our Commander-in-Chief calls such dirty tricks?” the envoy asked the Ahom General. “He calls them ‘thieves’ affairs.” Only thieves steal into a house at night to commit mischief.”

The Rajput General in his letter asked the Barphukan to put an end to these surreptitious night attacks. “I have now obtained evidence of the courage and valour of my brother Nawab (meaning Lachit Barphukan),” the letter read. “Being unable to match us in strength he is adopting tricks employed only by thieves, just as jackals contrive the death of wild elephants. No honour accrues in fighting with such dotards; and it is not shameful if one shows his back against thieves and robbers. So I am not going to fight any longer.” Strangely enough, it is recorded that for a

while Ram Singh did withdraw himself from the field of battle, allowing his lieutenants to continue the engagements.

"Ah, that is our way of fighting, tell the Raja that," Lachit Barphukan laughed and replied. "You see, only lions fight at night! Also, your Raja too is not averse to dipping into his bag of tricks. His soldiers tried to infiltrate into our fort at Amingaon by digging a tunnel! Had we not been alert and flooded the tunnel, we might have been in some amount of discomfort. Now what would you call that — a hero's affair? If he desires to fight, confront us directly."

Lachit followed up this jocular response by sending a formal letter refuting the Rajput Commander's accusation that he had vitiated the dignity of warfare by instituting attacks at night, sent through his own emissaries Rani Kataki and Kalia Kataki. "We wanted to test whether Ram Singha possesses the stamina to fight on land," the letter read. "It must be remembered that lions alone fight at night, while others fight during daytime whether on land or water." (149)

But Ram Singha was convinced that the chivalrous rules of war did not permit fighting by night. In battles in other parts of India which he had participated in the two combating parties downed their weapons whenever conchshells or trumpets sounded the signal to wind up fighting for the day, to be resumed next morning. To this the two Assamese envoys, both Brahmins, responded in a clear attempt to aggravate Mughal conceptions of Assam being a land of sorcery: "The Assamese cannot but fight at night as they have in their army a force of one hundred thousand *rakshasas* or demons who are all man-eaters and night rovers." The Rajput General refused to believe this but the

two messengers reiterated that nothing but truth would escape from the lips of Brahmins!

Ram Singha then appeared to be convinced of the truth of the Brahmin messengers' assertion and said: "I now understand why the Assamese army is so powerful at night. They have *rakshasas* and cannibals in their camps! But I must be furnished with proof, and only then will I believe the word of Brahmins."

The two envoys reported back to Lachit reiterating the entire conversation and its import. The Commander-in-Chief praised them for their presence of mind, and promised to provide the Rajput General with the "proof" he required. From that night on, the groups of skeleton dancers were complemented by other forms of "*rakshasas* and cannibals" — Assamese soldiers dressed in black garments, their faces grotesquely painted, each carrying a human leg in one hand and burnt fish in the other. Through numerous nights which followed these soldiers flitted about at a safe distance around the Mughal camps, performing a macabre dance and pointing the legs in their hands towards the enemy soldiers and emitting blood-curdling shrieks. The petrifying effect on the ordinary Mughal soldiers could well be imagined! Having witnessed the *rakshasa* army with his own eyes, even Ram Singha was convinced that the Brahmin envoys indeed had spoken the truth! ⁽¹⁵⁰⁾

Aware that he was not making much headway with his land army, towards August and September, 1669, the Rajput General brought some of his ships into play. In the process he received a foretaste of what would happen later at Saraighat. As some Mughal ships, each mounted with 16 cannons, sailed up to the Assamese stockades Lachit Barphukan himself led his naval contingent and challenged

them. The outcome was disastrous for the Mughals and they retreated after facing heavy casualties. ⁽¹⁵¹⁾

The reality that neither his martial exertions nor peace feelers were making any impact on his adversary gradually sunk into the Rajput King and he asked the Assamese envoys, Bhakatdah and Dhuli, as to who were the Commanders who had been thus toying with him. "Please explain," he asked them, "why a *Kshatriya* like myself have not been able to attain success? What are the peculiar features of the Assamese strategy and wherein lies their invincibility? Who are their Commanders and what are their names?"

The envoys presented Raja Ram Singh with a formidable list of the Assamese leaders: "Oh Maharaja, listen to what we say. The Premier Rup-Swarga (Atan) Buragohain has taken the field in person along with the Barphukan whose name is Lachit. The other principal Commanders are Champa Paniphukan son of Phul Barua, Laluki namdayangia Phukan, Pelan Charingiya Phukan, Deka Phukan, Gohain Phukan, Barpatra Gohain, Bargohain, Sadiya-Khowa Rup Sandikai, and Miri Sandikai. The Junior Commanders are Sen Gohain, Moran Gohain, Lechai son of Rangachila, Luthuri Dayangia Rajkhowa, Nam Dayangia Rajkhowa, Pani-Dihingia Rajkhowa, Tarun-Dihingia Rajkhowa, Majiu-Abhaypuria Rajkhowa, Saru-Abhaypuria Rajkhowa, Namdangia Rajkhowa, Gajpuria Rajkhowa, Dikhowmukhia Rajkhowa, Tar-Salguria Rajkhowa, Neog Lathum and Chaodang Barua — those are the Nawabs of intermediate ranks. Besides these, there are Commanders of all grades and ranks. Not to speak of yourself, not even the Padshah of Delhi will be able to vanquish them in war."

Ram Singha then enquired as to why these Commanders were absent in the previous wars. To this the envoys replied with a lie: "These Commanders ordinarily live at Namrup at a distance of a month's journey from the capital, and they did not get any information whatsoever of the outbreak of hostilities. They have heard about it this time, and therefore they have come." (152)

"Ram Singha received confirmation of the report of the Assamese messengers from the lips of his own envoy Punditrai. The latter described the Bargohain, the Barpatra Gohain and the Barphukan as 'wonderfully capable Commanders presenting a rare combination of beauty, accomplishment, valour and wisdom.' 'As to Atan Buragohain,' said Panditrai, — 'He is young in years, fair and handsome in features, sober and deep in intelligence, dexterous in all matters, and he excels all others in the soundness of his counsel. The Buragohain is also an arch-diplomat.' Hearing this Ram Singha observed, 'It is really wonderful that a man can be so intelligent and circumspect at this tender age. Who will be able to cope with such a Minister when he comes to years? Pride should be the heritage of the land where such a counsellor has taken birth.'" (153)

Bhakatdah also told Ram Singha about Churamoni Daivajna, astrologer-in-Chief to the Barphukan, whose calculations were reported to be so accurate and infallible that the Assamese army was sure to achieve the desired result when they acted according to his auspicious indications. Bhakatdah further informed Ram Singha that Churamoni was paid one thousand rupees per month. The Rajput General attempted to entice the astrologer to accept service under him, offering four thousand rupees per month

as salary, and told Bhakatdah that if he could induce the astrologer to switch sides, he would be paid ten thousand rupees as reward. Bhakatdah broached the offer to Churamoni, who said: "At times I feel tempted to go and see the fun. I have been responsible for the slaughter of so many Mughal soldiers that I will not be surprised if they capture me alive, and I may also exasperate the Barphukan for carrying on liaison with the enemy."

He, of course, informed Lachit about the offer, but the latter vehemently shot down such a device to raise money and expressly forbade the astrologer to even contemplate that kind of a step. Bhakatdah then made the mistake of trying to secretly entice Churamoni to the presence of Ram Singha. When Lachit was apprised of this, he ordered that Bhakatdah be arrested for having promoted Ram Singha's designs and thrown into the waters of the Brahmaputra as punishment. But Bhakatdah saved himself by deserting the Assamese camp and fleeing to the shelter of the Mughals. ⁽¹⁵⁴⁾

There are a number of other anecdotes in the Ahom chronicles regarding the astrologers embedded in Lachit Barphukan's army. "On another day Samudra Churamoni Doloi and Sarobar Doloi, the two astute astrologers accompanying the Ahom army, were crossing the Brahmaputra in a war-boat, when suddenly they were attacked in the middle of the river. A clod of blood emitted by a wounded soldier fell upon the body of Sarobar, and he fainted, while his comrade Samudra Churamoni saved himself by erecting a wall of defence inside the boat with twenty shields stripped off the bodies of dead soldiers. The astrologer noticed with his own eyes the havoc caused on that day to the soldiers on the boat. The Barphukan reprimanded the astrologers for having boarded the war-sloop, saying, 'I do not know who allowed these astrologers

to get into the war-boats. If they die, we become helpless, as their predictions are our effective inspiration.' To this Samudra replied, 'In the war of Mahabharata men died in all parts of the theatre of contest, and traces could not be obtained of the venues of death.'" ⁽¹⁵⁵⁾

Considering that the preliminary skirmished lasted for nearly two years, it is no wonder that the narrative of Ram Singha's Assam campaign is peppered with interesting anecdotes, some of these being without doubt apocryphal, some even of a humorous nature despite the killings and sufferings of ordinary soldiers. One such story refers to an Assamese Captain named Koa Mriddha, the word *koa* meaning a crow. During the heat of a naval engagement the boat captained by Koa Mriddha was captured by the enemy. The victorious Mughal sailors sought to seal their captor's humiliation by diverting themselves and asked him to dance. Koa Mriddha agreed to do so, and after covertly signalling with his eyes to the oarsmen of his boat to be ready, he asked his captors to clap their hands musically in rhythm to his dance. The captive danced with gusto, the Mughal soldiers clapped vigorously. When the dance and the clapping reached a crescendo, the Assamese oarsmen with a sudden manoeuvre deftly steered the boat to their side of the river-bank, out of reach of the enemy, having his captors shouting "The *koa* has flown!" It is said that when Ram Singha heard of this incident he simply exclaimed: "How clever is that Assamese *sardar*!" ⁽¹⁵⁶⁾





PRELUDE TO THE END-GAME

It may be recalled that Aurangzeb had first learnt of the Assamese recovery of Gauhati and Lower Assam in December, 1667 CE. Raja Ram Singha, sent on a retaliatory expedition at the head of a huge army, had left Delhi in February 1668, his forces expanding as vassal kings on his path provided additional soldiers and war materials, and had reached Rangamati, the eastern frontier outpost of the Mughals, in February 1669. His initial advance into Kamrup had been relatively rapid because the Assamese frontier garrisons were instructed to retreat towards the stronghold of Gauhati, and he had been able to strike camp first at Sualkuchi, and then Hajo, by April, 1669.

But then the Mughal campaign had almost been stalled! The stout fortification of Gauhati and the area around the port-city, as also the brilliant deployment of troops and their Commanders by Lachit Barphukan, had ensured that despite a number of attempts by the Rajput Raja the mammoth Mughal army could not cause any significant dent on Assamese defences. It was August, 1669 now. In Delhi, Emperor Aurangzeb was becoming restive. Almost a year and a half had elapsed since his force under Ram Singha had set off on their campaign to subjugate

Assam. But, clearly, the passage had not been as smooth for the Rajput General as it had been for Mir Jumla!

Lachit Barphukan, on the other hand, was not worried that relatively little had been achieved during the last six months since the Mughal began their assault from Rangamati. In the war-council he had broached his strategy before his senior officers. The Assamese had nothing to lose by remaining ensconced within the safety of their fortified city, repulsing the sporadic Mughal assaults as they came, while harassing the enemy through hit and run tactics and other ingenious means. He well knew the danger of confronting the Mughals on open ground where his foot-soldiers would be like sitting ducks before the might of the enemy's cavalry. One Mughal soldier on a horse alone could decimate scores of Assamese foot soldiers if a fight was to take place on an open field! Their strategy should be to lure Raja Ram Singha into a naval engagement where the Ahoms would be able to fight on equal terms.

It was just a matter of time till the morale of the Mughal soldiers would reach an unbearable low, their numbers and provisions drop to an unsustainable level, and the Rajput General would be coerced into embarking on a headlong clash on the Brahmaputra River. His arguments were backed to the hilt by Prime Minister Atan Buragohain as also the other senior officers, who agreed that naval fighting was their mainstay, thus every effort should be made to entice the enemy into undertaking one, no matter how long it took.

But, however, apparently not all! One of Lachit's senior-most lieutenants, Pelan Phukan, who had been entrusted with the command of the Rangmahal fort, was secretly of the opinion that the rains had provided the best opportunity for a counter-attack, and by simply harrying

the enemy Lachit was needlessly procrastinating and prolonging the war. Naturally, in the war-council this officer, fearing Lachit's anger, had kept his thoughts to himself and pretended to agree with the others.

A Ghorakuonr had been given the job of liaison between Garhgaon and Gauhati, carrying messages and instructions to and fro. Pelan, in secret, told that officer that the king should know of Lachit's hesitation to launch an all-out attack on the invaders and Chakradhwaj Singha should use his authority to override his Commander-in-Chief's strategy. There may, of course, have been another reason for Pelan's treachery in going behind the back of his Commander-in-Chief.

It may be recalled that this officer, during the earlier campaign to seize the fort at Itakhuli in Gauhati, had observed with apprehension how well guarded the fort was and communicated this to Lachit. "I shall become the bondsman to the soldier who can storm the Itakhuli fort," was alleged to have been his comment! Chakradhwaj Singha had been infuriated with Pelan, and had sent some ladies' apparel comprising mekhelas or lower garments worn by Assamese women, broomsticks and axes! The king's letter had contained an order from the Ahom monarch that if Pelan had made such defeatist comments he should be executed, and his soldiers made to wear the female garments. It had been only after Lachit's intervention and his assurance to his king that Pelan had never uttered such a comment that the king's anger was assuaged and the order rescinded. Thus the misinformation conveyed to the king's messenger might have been an attempt by Pelan to get back into Chakradhwaj Singha's favour by showing how eager he himself was to undertake offensive action to oust the enemy from Assam!

Whatever may have been the motive, the Ghorakuonr duly reported Pelan's observations to the Ahom monarch. Like Aurangzeb in Delhi, Chakradhwaj Singha at Garhgaon too was chaffing at the lack of defining results although half a year had elapsed since the Mughals intruded into his territory. Pelan's opinion, therefore, accorded perfectly with his own impatient state of mind, and he readily believed that Lachit and his fellow officers were neglecting their duties by not directly confronting the enemy.

His suspicions regarding Lachit Barphukan's abilities and determination to fight the Mughals were deepened by a change of strategy on the part of Raja Ram Singha, who by now appears to have abandoned all thoughts of adhering to an honourable "code of war conduct," and taken to the wily manner in which the Assamese Commanders had been fighting. Having failed to get a positive response to his offer that he would refrain from fighting if the Assamese retreated to the positions they had held before retaking Lower Assam, the Rajput General resorted to false propaganda to paint Lachit in a bad light.

He shot an arrow bearing a letter addressed to Lachit which read: "Oh, Barphukan, yesterday you accepted from us a reward of one lakh rupees and you signed a written agreement to desist from fighting against us. But it appears you have not yet abandoned your war-array. May I know the reason?" But, cleverly, the Rajput General had the arrow directed not at Lachit's position but to the camp of Miri Sandikai Phukan. The latter, fearful of royal wrath if he concealed such "vital information," without informing Lachit, forwarded the letter to the Ahom king. The letter seemed to corroborate what Pelan Phukan had communicated, and Chakradhwaj Singha's suspicion of Lachit's motives deepened. Fortunately, Atan Buragohain

learnt of this, and hastily intervened to convince the king that the letter was an underhand attempt by the enemy to cast aspersions on the noble Barphukan, who was, in fact, an honest and capable officer absolutely loyal to the monarch. ⁽¹⁵⁷⁾

Ram Singha at that point of time added fuel to the fire by sending yet another letter to the Barphukan through an emissary named Sonbar Nadial inviting the king of Assam to fight a duel in the presence of the two hostile armies. "I, Ram Singha, son of Mirja Raja Jai Singha," the letter read, "and a descendent of Raja Mandhata, invite the king of Assam to fight a duel with me in the presence of the two hostile armies. If I am defeated I will return with my army to Bengal. But, if I win, I demand the retreat of the Assamese army." Chakradhwaj Singha merely dismissed the insolent challenge by replying: "Ram Singha is a mere servant and has no chattra (umbrella) over his head. So I do not like to fight a duel with such a man." ⁽¹⁵⁸⁾

By early August Chakradhwaj Singha's patience had worn thin! He sent an ultimatum to his Barphukan to immediately engage the enemy with the aim of ousting them from Assam's territory, or face disciplinary action. Once again, in order to drive home his displeasure at what he considered to be dilatory methods adopted by his senior officers, he sent a consignment of clothes worn by slave-girls, together with a handful of axes! The implication was that unless Lachit immediately launch an offensive against the Mughal army, he and his fellow officers would be made to wear the female garments and their hearts would be ripped up with the axes!

The "message" placed Lachit on the horns of a dilemma. At that point of time a large detachment of the Mughal force was camped close to Dalbari, near the Alaboi

Mountain, upon a vast plain which stretched from banks of the Brahmaputra River to the Sessa River. An assault on it at that precise moment would be suicidal for it would contravene his strategy of refraining from attacking the enemy on open ground. Yet, at the same time, Lachit owed fealty to the Ahom monarch and must obey his command. He articulated his dilemma to the other senior officers by stating: "The Mughals have concentrated their forces at Alaboi. It will be difficult for us to escape unscathed if we fling a stone into a revengeful nest of immature hornets. At the same time I cannot but obey the command of His Majesty." (159)

Ironically, the Barphukan's dilemma was resolved by Ram Singha himself, when he sent from his base at Alaboi an insulting challenge to him to attack his forces on open ground if he dared. Though cognizant of the Rajput General's awareness of the Mughal superiority on a plain area where the cavalry could operate, Lachit at the same time knew that Chakradhwaj Singha, who was certain to learn about the challenge, would react unfavourably if it was not taken up; he, therefore, was forced into sending a force against the encamped enemy. However, to camouflage its basic weakness, he engaged in "diplomacy, deception and misrepresentation." Through a messenger he informed Ram Singha that he would send a force of twenty thousand infantrymen against the Mughal force. But, in reality, he sent forty thousand! The force, which included artillerymen and archers, was placed under the command of Charingia Pelan Phukan, Dikhowmukhia Rajkhowa, Nam-Dayangia Rajkhowa, and Opar-Dayangia Rajkhowa. The strategy was to place ten thousand men at the forefront, ten thousand to shelter themselves in trenches, and twenty thousand to remain concealed from the enemy.

Knowing that his forces were at a disadvantage because it would be confronting the enemy on a plain area, an additional subterfuge was said to have been used by Lachit, one which had proved very effective against the Koch General Chilarai almost a century ago. They had the archers and musketeers dress up as Brahmins and stand at the very first rows of the advancing Assamese force, in the supposition that, like the Koches in the past, the Mughal soldiers too would be reluctant to fight with Brahmins. But this subterfuge turned out to be a damp squib, and it is said that from his position atop an elephant at the rear, Ram Singha laughed loudly at what had been attempted by the Barphukan and admired the originality of his adversaries. ⁽¹⁶⁰⁾

However, the Rajput General was thoroughly hoodwinked by Lachit's message that he would be sending 20,000 men for the assault. He judged that a force of 10,000, enjoying the advantage of superior firepower would be sufficient to vanquish the Assamese in the battle-field, so he sent only that number under the command of an officer named Mir Nawab to combat the adversaries. It was an act of one-upmanship, designed to prove the superiority of the Mughal forces who with lesser men could vanquish an Assamese army twice their number!

An additional act of one-upmanship by Raja Ram Singha was to place a woman named Madanavati, dressed in the attire of a male Mughal warrior, at the vanguard of his troops. This was to drive home the point that even women soldiers could defeat the Assamese. Also, it was to ensure, in his own words, that "If she is defeated we shall not be subjected to any disgrace; and if victory be on the side of the enemy, they will be credited with no honour or prestige." ⁽¹⁶¹⁾

On 5th August, 1669 the two armies clashed on the plains of Alaboi, south of the mountain. Madanavati, displaying great valour, swept into the Assamese front-lines. She moved with lightning speed, making her an impossible target for the archers and musketeers. Led by her, the Mughal soldiers sliced through at least four of the Assamese front-lines, inflicting great casualties, before being repulsed by the enemy sheltered in the trenches, who now emerged to counterattack with great vigour. Her detachment was routed and she had to jump into the Brahmaputra River with her horse to try and escape by crossing it. But Lachit had placed a detachment on the sandbanks of the river too just for such a contingency and she and the fleeing Mughal soldiers were shot down. ⁽¹⁶²⁾

“Mir Nawab, the Mughal Commander, then personally led the attack against the Assamese army. Churamoni Daivajna predicted the outcome to Lachit Barphukan that Mir Nawab was destined to fall in the engagement. The Barphukan and his principal lieutenants were watching the battle from a distance protected by an enclosure of screen plates. They questioned the astrologer Churamoni Daivajna as to the issue of the encounter, as to who would be wounded, who would be killed and who would be able to inflict the heaviest blow. As the warriors advanced to the battle-front Churamoni went on predicting: ‘This is a valorous fighter, he will come back after vanquishing the enemy. The other man will be half-killed and the third will be completely smashed.’ The predictions of the astrologer were fulfilled to the letter, and Lachit Barphukan shouted out: ‘Thanks to thee, Churamoni Daivajna, you have brought within your control the entire science of warfare.’” ⁽¹⁶³⁾

The stratagem adopted by Lachit came into play as Mir Nawab took personal charge of the campaign and led a strong force against the Assamese. The 20,000 additional Assamese troops now joined their brethren as they routed the vastly outnumbered Mughal detachment. The Ahom Commander Luthuri Rajkhowa succeeded in capturing Mir Nawab and bringing him before Lachit. This Ahom officer, during the time of Mir Jumla, had become a prisoner of the Mughals and was held captive in Delhi. At that time Mir Nawab had interceded on his behalf and secured his release. The Mughal Commander now pleaded with Luthuri to return the favour and release him. But Luthuri, perforce, had to turn down the request and reply: "What was done by you cannot be replicated by me. If I release you even my sons and daughters will not be spared from extermination. Hence desist from making such a request to me." (164)

Mir Nawab was taken to the Assamese camp and held there. There was great jubilation among the soldiers at the rout of the Mughals; it seemed that the apprehensions of Lachit of fighting on open ground were unjustified! But, in reality, the shrewd Commander-in-Chief had been absolutely accurate, as the subsequent developments were to show, which resulted in one of the most horrific and tragic episodes to have taken place in Assamese history!

The humiliation suffered by the Mughals, particularly the death of Madanavati and the capture of Mir Nawab, enraged Raja Ram Singha. He was quick to realise that the crafty Assamese Commander-in-Chief had outwitted him by providing false statistics. He told his lieutenants: "I was informed at the outset that the Assamese would despatch to the battle only twenty thousand soldiers, and I sent only ten thousand to avoid outnumbering the enemy which amounts to a contravention of the ethics of war. My other

soldiers were ready for action and I could have despatched any number of them as reinforcement. It was a sin to witness encounters between two unequal forces.” (165)

His rage and fury made the Rajput Raja forget all about the “ethics of war!” He summoned up a large contingent of the Imperial cavalry and, with himself at the lead, charged after the Assamese foot-soldiers, who were returning in triumph to their fortified bastion along with their prisoners. The Mughal horsemen carried with them new yantras or machines, as well as long shields which would protect their entire bodies from being pierced by lances, shots or arrows. The cavalry tore into the Assamese troops before they could reach their fort, cutting and slashing, trampling the helpless soldiers under their horses’ hooves. It was a carnage of horrendous proportions; the Assamese soldiers bravely tried to offer resistance, but they were no match to the well-armed, disciplined Mughal cavalry. They fled in disarray; the Mughal horsemen cut them down. Only at sunset did the carnage end and the cavalry sound the retreat. But, by then, ten thousand corpses of Assamese warriors lay strewn upon the Alaboi plain, the biggest loss suffered by them in any campaign!

It was now Ram Singha’s turn to gloat at the outcome. “Look at the rashness of the Assamese,” he told his subordinates. “They venture to fight on the plains with Amber horsemen!” He even sent an arrow-borne message to his Assamese counterpart asking him to refrain from such “tomfooleries” in the future. Concealing his own despondency, Lachit retorted with a countering message which said: “Numerous chieftains of the neighbouring territories have joined our ranks. Some of them sought a diversion without consulting us. A detachment has been lost. We have many more still fully prepared for action.” (166)

Lachit was disheartened by the death of such a huge number of his men, and the failure to comprehend the ground realities on the battle-front by those ensconced safely at Garhgaon. "Each of our soldiers is a pillar of strength," he told Atan Buragohain. "That we've lost ten thousand such stalwarts at Alaboi pains me." The Buragohain asked the Barphukan not to lose heart. "We have an advantage over Raja Ram Singh," he pointed out. "The Mughal commander is fighting under compulsion. We can note by the nature of his war tactics that his heart is not in this campaign. You and I, on the other hand, are fighting for king and country, as are our officers and men. Our passion would give us ultimate victory. Such a reverse should never shake your confidence in our ultimate victory. Eventualities of this character are normal in a protracted warfare. When you agitate the waters of a pond for catching larger fish the fish-catchers would be pricked by the thorny scales of the smaller fries. You should judge your success by the number of large catches." (167)

No doubt, the disaster at Alaboi was a huge setback to the Assamese campaign to retain hold of the territories in Lower Assam and an enormous boost to the Mughal endeavour to wrest back the same. However, some positives did emerge from the disaster. For one thing, it did not invest any strategic advantage to the Mughals, being in the nature of an isolated episode in the long and drawn out war. For another, it served to lessen the pressures on both the Commanders that had been imposed on them from Garhgaon and Delhi respectively.

Aurangzeb was so pleased with this success that, on learning about it, he increased Ram Singha's mansab from 4000 to 5000. Similarly, it eradicated from the mind of the Ahom monarch Chakradhwaj Singha all the misgivings and

suspensions he had harboured against Lachit due to the misrepresentations of a few of his subordinates. He realised that Lachit had been absolutely right in the strategy he had been adopting and the Alaboi debacle, paradoxically, served to re-instil his faith on his Barphukan.



Though he had been elated by the victory at Alaboi, Raja Ram Singha remained all too aware that it had not changed a thing and he had achieved no tangible gains against his adversaries, nor been able to make the slightest of dents in their defences. Aurangzeb had sent instructions that his General should commence razing the area adjacent to the land the army was occupying and carry out atrocities against the civil population who had not yet fled in face of the Mughal army's advance, in order to force the hand of the Assamese. But brave Rajput that he was, Ram Singha desisted from such a course of action. Nor did Alaboi enthuse him into making a concerted assault on the Assamese defences, and thus his campaign continued to be a protracted, almost static one, peppered with a few skirmishes and a great deal of diplomatic exchanges.

But he did assume that the Alaboi disaster might make the Ahom king more malleable to an idea of a retreat from Gauhati and Lower Assam so that the earlier boundaries could be established. The Rajput Chief thus again spelled out to the Assamese messengers in his camp his desire to obtain a peaceful resolution to the dispute, even making an offer to pay compensation of three lakh rupees for the Gauhati fortification if only the Barphukan departed from the port-city. Despite prolific reassurances from the

Assamese side that they too desired a peaceful resolution, the Barphukan made not the slightest endeavour to act on Ram Singha's proposal.

By now the Rajput General appreciated that Lachit was a savvy diplomat who could refute any logic the former could offer to hasten a negotiated peace. He asked an Assamese envoy, Kaupatia Madhabcharan, about his redoubtable antagonist, and where he was when Mir Jumla had overrun Assam and occupied the Ahom capital of Garhgaon. Madhabcharan, of course, as necessitated by the post he held, was an expert liar! "In the eastern region," he replied without batting an eyelid, "there is a kingdom called Nara, which was bound by a treaty to pay annually to the Ahom monarch a stipulated tribute of horses, clothes, elephants and money. The king of Nara disregarded the terms of the treaty and Lachit Phukan was despatched by the Ahom monarch to extort the tribute from the refractory Lord of Nara. The Ahom General devastated the country of Nara, and extorted from its unwilling Lord the tribute. On hearing of the arrival of Mir Jumla in Assam, the Assamese Commander pursued the Nawab, but on reaching Kaliabar he learned that the Mughal General had been gathered to his forefathers."

The wily envoy further embellished his narrative: "Numerous Chieftains of the mountainous regions have become our willing allies in the campaign. They are accompanied by a total strength of three lakhs of soldiers. They are not amenable to any considerations of right and wrong. Their participation in the war has been directly sanctioned by His Majesty, and they rush furiously against the enemy without waiting for the orders of the General. They are quick and sudden in their attacks, and their movements and actions cannot be presaged."

Once again the Rajput Commander conveyed through Madhabcharan that if the Assamese do not back down from their position a direct battle would be the only course left open to the Mughals, which they with their overwhelming superiority was sure to win. He himself did not want to engage in such a fight which will needlessly lead to slaughter of men, thus fervently wished that the Barphukan immediately evacuate Gauhati and revert to the bounds agreed upon in the 1639 Treaty.

In consultation with the Premier Atan Buragohain, Lachit conveyed the following reply to the Rajput General: "I am only a servant of His Majesty. Any terms into which I may enter with the Rajput Raja may not receive the approbation of our sovereign. Therefore, the Raja should desire for a treaty which will be ratified by all the parties concerned, and its object enhanced by continued observance. If such a treaty can be concluded, the Raja will be praised in all quarters. The Raja has been despatched by the Emperor of Delhi for his intelligence and skill in warfare. If he goes from here without the credit of a decisive victory over our army the expectations made of him will no longer be justified." ⁽¹⁶⁹⁾

Thus, despite the debacle suffered by the Assamese at Alaboi, the situation was back to square one, and there was no movement at all on the chess-board of Raja Ram Singha's campaign. The valiant Rajput General, famed for his exploits in other regions of India, was proving to be a lame duck in Assam. The months dragged on and despite it being the dry season when a concerted attack could have been mounted, the year 1669 slid into 1670 with almost nothing happening to change the status quo. Ram Singha's reluctance to embark on a direct attack on the Assamese defences, which had proved to be impregnable during the

numerous earlier assaults at different points, was further heightened by the news of his own family that he had been receiving from Delhi. Aurangzeb, perhaps taking umbrage at the inability or the unwillingness of the father to make any progress in attaining the objective he had been mandated to, had taken out his anger upon Ram Singha's son!

The Rajput General's widowed mother as well as his wife wrote to him that the Emperor had ordered his son, Krishna Singha, to entertain him by fighting with tigers in an arena, something he would not perhaps have dared to do if Ram Singha had been in Delhi. Accordingly, watched on by spectators including the Emperor himself, Krishna Singha was made to enter the arena armed with his sword and shield, and confront a couple of Royal Bengal Tigers. The young man had fought for his life for a considerable length of time and, fortunately, succeeded in slaying the wild beasts. A postscript, warning Ram Singha about the Emperor's designs, was added to the letter.

"The Emperor contrived the death of Krishna Singha by making him wrestle with tigers," the letter read. "Such a friend is the Emperor! Never dream that we shall gain by your invasion of the eastern land of Assam. We are told that there is universal religious music and recital in Assam, and that cows, Brahmins and Vaishnavs are living there in peace and happiness. You are aware of the consequences of bringing them under foreign domination. Remember also that after having invaded Assam Mir Jumla could not thrive long. So take heed, and do as you think proper." The family also reported that Emperor Aurangzeb had proposed that Krishna Singha convert to Islam. ⁽¹⁷⁰⁾

The brave Rajput General's growing lack of enthusiasm for a full scale war was, therefore, hardly

surprising. He was, truly, stuck between the devil and the deep sea. He could well foresee the consequences for his family as well as for himself if he were to throw in the towel and take his troops back to where they had come from. Nor could he devise any concrete way by which to exploit any possible weak points in the Assamese defences. So he continued his reiterated demands that the Barphukan retreat to original positions, even as he kept attempting to bring about dissension in the Assamese ranks through spreading rumours that their Commanders had been sending him feelers about switching sides, as also to corrupt the officers by sending money and gifts as bribes.

The Assamese envoy Madhabcharan who carried the money and gifts was accompanied by a Mughal envoy, Panditrai, reputed to be an astute diplomat, sent by Shaista Khan, the Governor of Dhaka. Quite a few years back, in 1664, Khan had sent this ambassador to visit Ahom territory, arming him with a letter addressed to Atan Buragohain which said: "I have sent this time Panditrai who is a highly trusted man of ours. You should send him back soon. You are fortunate that such a devout Brahmin and a Pundit is visiting your place out of his goodwill towards you. You should, therefore, make him satisfied, for which you will be greatly benefitted, and earn both piety and religious merit." (171)

Obviously, even more than his reputation as a diplomat, the accompaniment of Panditrai was required to ensure that the Assamese envoy did not appropriate some of the money and gifts for himself! Madhabcharan also carried a letter from Ram Singha to the Assamese Commanders: "I am sending this money to the Phukans and Rajkhowas. They should exercise their influence in

procuring the evacuation of Gauhati. I am prepared to do whatever I am asked to do." Little could Ram Singha appreciate the patriotic zeal and nationalist pride which had motivated the officers to give their all for the defence of their motherland. They rejected the offers of bribe, reporting the same to the Barphukan. ⁽¹⁷²⁾

Madhabcharan on this mission also carried a priceless necklace studded with precious gems as a gift to Lachit Barphukan, with the request that he wear it when he next appeared on the battlefield. Not surprisingly, Lachit spurned this offering with the contempt it deserved. Panditrai used all his diplomatic skills to persuade the Barphukan to cede Gauhati to the Mughal forces, outlining the potential consequences if he failed to do so. But the Commander-in-Chief retained the same stance he had communicated earlier to Raja Ram Singha. "Our Swarga-Maharaja is the Lord of the East, and the Padshah is the Lord of the West. If they decide, then we can surrender our territory, and you can also surrender Bengal. If we enter into any terms ourselves, our respective masters may refuse to ratify them." Panditrai, along with Madhabcharan, had to return to the Mughal camp with their mission unfulfilled! ⁽¹⁷³⁾

By now Raja Ram Singha was more than convinced that nothing but a direct assault by his formidable armada of war-ships would be able to dislodge the Assamese from their fortified positions at Gauhati and force them out of Lower Assam. The highly intelligent Panditrai, during his visit to the Assamese encampment, had gleaned the information that there was an Achilles' heel in the enemy's defences — a slight opening in the rampart in the sandbanks of the Brahmaputra River between the Barphukan's headquarters at Lachit and at the foot of the Nilachal

Hills upon which the Kamakhya temple was located. The rampart erected on this portion, known as Andharubali, was vulnerable because of constant erosion by the mighty river. A triangle could be visualised between the river-pier at Andharubali known as Amrajuri-ghat and Itakhuli on the south bank and Aswakranta on the north, and the plan of a naval assault could be formulated. Artillery-men and horses could be carried by war-boats after his ships and sailor carved out a breach and a major attack could be launched.

Enthused by the potentials of a successful attack Ram Singha began to plan for the same, sending out spies to gauge the veracity of Panditrai's intelligence inputs, while making an estimate of his own naval strength. He realised that the protracted nature of the campaign had depleted his resources, and he sent out messages to Dhaka and Delhi asking for reinforcements. These took time to arrive and, with the rainy season breaking out, his plans for a full-scale attack had to be postponed.

Meanwhile, in April 1670, the Ahom monarch Chakradhwaj Singha breathed his last. The role of this great king in restoring Assamese pride after it had touched rock bottom during Mir Jumla's invasion had been remarkable. "Just when the war was taking a more critical turn Chakradhwaj Singha, king of Assam, died in April, 1670. His overwhelming sense of self-respect and patriotism was mainly responsible in restoring to his country its lost prestige and glory. His personality instilled courage and determination into the hearts of his Commanders and men. When the best brains of the country were absent at Gauhati the king had to conduct the administration with inferior material. The maintenance of an efficient civil administration was necessary to

guarantee the regular reinforcements of men and material to a distant army. Swargadeo Chakradhwaj Singha gave the desired momentum, and it worked its way to ultimate victory.”⁽¹⁷⁴⁾





CHECK-MATE!

“ His (Chakradhwaj Singha's) reign was so fully occupied by constant wars that there was very little time for the execution of public works, and the only new road constructed was that from Teliadanga to Jhanzimukh.

“His brother Maju Gohain, thenceforth known as Sunyatpha, succeeded him. He assumed the Hindu name of Udayaditya Singha, and married his deceased brother's wife.

“The negotiations with the Mughals continued. Raja Ram Singha proposed that the old boundary should be maintained, and the Barphukan expressed his concurrence but, while he was waiting for the Ahom king's confirmation, Ram Singha, who had received reinforcements and apparently suspected his sincerity, advanced with his army to Sitamari and sent a detachment into Darrang. Udayaditya thereupon prepared to renew the war, and ordered the Buragohain to march with 20, 000 men from Samdhara to Saraighat. The Mughals advanced to meet them and a duel engagement ensued. The Assamese were successful on land, but the navy was forced to retreat to Barhila, and the army was thus also obliged to fall back. The arrival of the

Barphukan with more ships enabled the Assamese to return the attack. This time the Mughal navy was beaten and a second land victory was gained by the Assamese." (175)

As the Ahom *buranjis* indicate, though Udayaditya Singha was not of the same calibre as his elder brother Chakradhwaj, yet he too was not prepared to yield to the Mughals and determined to prevent them from re-occupying Gauhati and Lower Assam, a possible outcome that would open the way for them to advance towards Garhgaon, as had happened during the invasion by Mir Jumla. He, therefore, continued to urge his Barphukan to keep on defending Gauhati and, when possible, launch an offensive to repulse the Mughal advance, even as he regularly replenished him with men, war material and war-ships.

But, as Ram Singha's long drawn campaign entered into the year 1671, weariness seeped into the Assamese camp too, and there were murmurs amongst the soldiers about the possibility they were not destined to return to their homes and families for a long time yet. Of greater concern was the pessimism that was being felt by the Assamese Commanders, reflected more and more in the war-conferences held regularly by Lachit. The severity of Emperor Aurangzeb's injunctions to his Rajput General before he set out on his campaign to Assam was by now known to every Assamese soldier and his immediate Commander. The Emperor, it was said, had warned Raja Ram Singha; "If you can accomplish your mission you will be made an *Omrao*, and given valuable presents. If you fail, your head would be taken off. I shall, besides, slay your children and dependents in a place far away from your territory." (176)

Such rumours floating around had convinced the men and their leaders that unless he was defeated in a risk-prone, headlong battle Ram Singha would never back away from his campaign, which seemed now destined to carry on forever! This increased the sense of fatigue and despondency floating around the Assamese camp, a psychological state of mind common in cases of protracted conflicts. The Commanders began to voice their opinion in the war-councils in support of a peace settlement, no matter that it might involve the yielding of Gauhati.

Lachit had been trying his utmost to go against this general trend and, as he had always attempted to do, personally move around the various points in his fortified city, meet common soldiers and their local Commanders, and put confidence into their minds. Yet he too began to be assailed by doubts about the wisdom of continuing the drawn out battle and to somehow bring it to an end.

The ambience, however, was not much different in the Mughal camp. The Mughal soldiers too were afflicted with the fatigue induced by their protracted engagements and, like the soldiers of Mir Jumla towards the end of his campaign, longed to get back home. Ram Singha, just as his adversary Lachit, too wanted a closure. No doubt he was by now mentally prepared to make his Andharubali gambit, but even then he needed to have a final try at peaceful rapprochement.

He, therefore, began to press his demand that the Assamese withdraw even more insistently than before. He sent no less than three envoys, Mira, Ramhari Karji and Panditrai, with a letter once again iterating his demands. Curiously enough, the Barphukan replied in the following: "The cordial relations established by Allah Yar Khan and my father have not yet lost the lustre of their renown. If

the Raja is keen on peace, he should send back Panditrai and Mira." He also sent some presents to Ram Singha.

The Rajput General promised to recall Panditrai and Mira, and this was duly communicated to Lachit Barphukan through the Assamese envoys Nim and Ramcharan. Apparently, on this occasion the Assamese envoys were received in the Mughal camp with "great pomp and ceremony" and "sandal paste was offered to them in a golden cup and betel-nuts in a silver tray." This made the Barphukan change his mind about receiving Panditrai and decide to make similar arrangements for his reception. The Ahom monarch Udayaditya was apprised of this, and he arranged silver and gold cups, trays and dishes, as well as embroidered cloths and canopies for use while receiving Panditrai. ⁽¹⁷⁷⁾

By now, of course, Ram Singha had realised that the gestures made by the Assamese leaders were all a charade designed to postpone any positive move towards striking a deal which would see them giving up their well-fortified port-city! He vehemently expressed his thoughts before the Assamese envoys Nim and Ramcharan: "There is no end of sending embassies, and nothing has been achieved. I request again that the Barphukan should surrender Gauhati to me, and release Syed Sana and the son of Syed Firoz. If I demand more than this, this sword in my hand which is like Parameswari or the Supreme Goddess will cause my annihilation; and this pearl-chain on my neck, a veritable Lakshmi, will desert me for good, and my fourteen generations will go to hell. If my words are not believed let us proceed to the temple of Madhab on the bank of the Lauhitya (Brahmaputra) where I am prepared to solemnly affirm my oaths. If my brother the Barphukan agrees to this proposal he shall be given whatever he shall desire." ⁽¹⁷⁸⁾

These words were communicated to the Barphukan by Nim and Ramcharan, but no Mughal envoy accompanied the Assamese messengers, nor was a formal letter addressed to either Lachit or the Ahom king was sent, clear testimony that the Rajput General was at the end of his tether! Lachit, in turn, conveyed Ram Singha's sentiments to Udayaditya Singha at Garhgaon. The latter did not approve of this action of his Barphukan, since the Rajput Raja had not observed protocol and did not send a letter through an official ambassador containing his proposal. The miffed monarch refused to send the articles he had arranged for Panditrai's reception to Lachit Barphukan at Gauhati. ⁽¹⁷⁹⁾

Such marked disapproval on the part of his monarch, particularly the latter's lack of acknowledgment of the sacrifices being made by his officers and men in the cause of king and country, disheartened Lachit. Nor were his spirits lifted by the reiterated suggestions of his senior lieutenants during the war-councils that he negotiate the terms of a peace treaty with the Mughals and persuade Swargadeo Udayaditya Singha of the advisability of striking such a deal.

"Due to the long continued hostilities the Ahom kingdom was seething with discontents and Commanders believed that Ram Singha would not leave their country without achieving the task imposed on him by Aurangzeb, hence some Commanders including the Barphukan contemplated the acceptance of the status quo of 1639. When the Buragohain and the Barphukan broached this matter of peace negotiations with the Mughals, the new king also expressed his willingness to settle the boundary question." ⁽¹⁸⁰⁾

Premier Atan Buragohain was the sole individual to oppose such a course of action. He said: "If you want to give up Gauhati at this stage, what was the good of fighting so long causing such loss to our men and provisions. Ram Singha has pressed his demands with oaths and promises praying for the restoration of the old limits. Even if we agree it is not known whether the Mughal Emperor will accept Ram Singha's proposal which is like a highway made of ashes. There is also no guarantee whether Ram Singha's successor in the Assam command will respect the stipulations of his predecessor. What shall we do then? Besides, where shall we go if we abandon Gauhati? We shall have to abandon Garhgaon as well and take shelter in Namrup." Udayaditya Singha, when apprised of the Buragohain's advice, agreed with it. Lachit's doubts and vacillations vanished due to such support and, in accordance with the orders of His Majesty, he remained ready for action. ⁽¹⁸¹⁾

Lachit was not to know, of course, of the demoralization gradually seeping into the mind and heart of his valiant, redoubtable Mughal counterpart. Ram Singha mentally acknowledged that it had been unrealistic of him to have expected the Assamese to yield Gauhati after having invested so much energy and resources in erecting its defences. He too now appreciated the love for freedom of the Assamese people and their antipathy to being subjugated by outside forces, which had inspired them to hold onto their position despite being confronted with such a mammoth army! "They could not reasonably be expected to forego what they had won through blood and toil. In fact, the Assamese were not expected to voluntarily forego Gauhati, the capital of Kamrup, enjoying natural and human fortifications as well as the strategic centres like

Pandu, Agiyathuri and Saraighat. Too late did Ram Singha realise this fundamental truth.

“Another unfavourable factor for the Mughal General was the attitude of his own master. Reports of his endless dallying with the Assamese for a settlement and of Mughal losses in skirmishes reached Aurangzeb. He came to realise from the letters of Shaista Khan and of Jafar Khan Wazir that the chances of the capture of the Gauhati fort were slowly receding and that despatch of further reinforcements would be futile. So, by a *farman* of 20 July, 1670, the General was ordered to send Askar Khan and several other Captains with their contingents back to the Imperial Court.....” (182)

At that precise point of time an envoy of Aurangzeb, Raship Khan, nephew of Admiral Munawwar Khan, arrived from Delhi with an openly insulting message to the proud Rajput warrior. “I have sent Ram Singha to fight with Assam, not to make friends with the people there,” the message read. To this Ram Singha replied: “I have not refrained from fighting, but it has proved useless. As there are no fields, fighting by spears, shields and guns is an impossible affair. The Assamese have erected an impenetrable wall of defence on both banks. There is the possibility of one naval fight only.” (183)

He had, of course, already prepared the plans for such a fight, and would embark on it, no matter his aversion of the fact that he had been humiliated, his son maltreated and his family threatened. There was no help for it — as a Rajput he was oath bound to the pledge made to Aurangzeb and had to attempt to bring this campaign to an end and oust the Assamese from Gauhati. Now there was to be no more negotiations or vacillations. The end-game to the

drawn out chess match had to be played out, even though victory might not be a certain result!



The prolonged nature of the many-year campaign had depleted the Mughal army both numerically as also in resources. This drawback could now no longer be expected to be compensated by reinforcements from Delhi. However, the Mughal Emperor had heeded an earlier request for reinforcements, and these came in the form of a few more war-vessels and three imperial officers brought along with him by Admiral Munawwar Khan. Ram Singha mustered up every resource now at his command and used them in a final do or die move. Some forty of his war-vessels sailed from their mooring up the Brahmaputra River, their cannons decimating the scout-boats sent to gauge their numerical strength. The Rajput General himself, to lead the advance, boarded one vessel at Sualkuchi, along with his artillery and archers under five *sardars* on the other ships. Detachments were also ordered to march along both the north and south bank.

But, as usual, the efficient spy-system alerted the Assamese leaders of the Mughal's intentions. As soon as he learnt of the offensive being launched by the Rajput Raja, Lachit sent out a general order to his commanders that every part of the fortifications of the port-city, on land and water, had to be reinforced and manned by soldiers. Atan Buragohain led a strong force of 20,000 to counter the advance made by Mughal foot-soldiers towards Darrang on the north bank. On the south bank, the Mughal land force was successfully countered by the Assamese forces. Being stymied on land, Ram Singha knew that a

naval-battle was now the sole alternative, and pressed on with his ships towards the only weak point in the Assamese defences, the Andharubali rampart, cannons blazing. He was heartened by the news that the Commander-in-Chief of the Assamese army and navy, Assam's Braveheart Lachit Barphukan, had suddenly fallen seriously ill and was bed ridden, and could not lead the resistance. Another reassuring news was that the Pani Phukan, the admiral of the Assamese naval fleet, too was ill and bedridden.

Yet, though severely ill, Lachit was not totally incapacitated and, from his position at the "archery store" in the Itakhuli fort, he was observing the enemy's movements, barking out instructions and forming defensive naval strategies. He sent out an order that in his absence Nara Hazarika, son of Miri Sandiqui, be made the overall Commander, and the Hazarika's detachment should be reinforced by an additional 2000 men. Instructions were also sent to immediately engage the advancing Mughal war-vessels, whose cannonade was posing grave danger to the river stockades at Andharubali.

A fierce battle broke out between the Mughal vessels and the Assamese naval fleet. The Mughal ships were huge and unwieldy; each being equipped with sixteen huge guns and manned with around 60 Mughal and European soldiers, were more suited to a war on high seas rather than a river. Also, they had to move upstream against the fierce currents of the Brahmaputra, which decreased their speed. In contrast, the Assamese boats, of the *hiloicharanao* war-vessel variety which carried mini-cannons mounted on them, as well as the *bacchhari* boats for carrying musketeers and archers, were far smaller, being at most 60 feet of length, or almost half that of the *ghurabs* of the Mughals.

Moreover, the sailors who manned the Mughal war-vessels were not familiar with the flow regime of the Brahmaputra. In contrast, the Assamese boatmen knew the river like the palms of their hands. Thus, despite the overwhelming naval superiority of the Mughals, the Ahom fleet for quite a while could stall their advance towards Andharubali, thereby giving workers at the stockades of that strategically important spot additional time to repair the damage, and the Assamese defenders to protect them from an assault. It was the only vulnerable spot between the Barphukan's base at Itakhuli and the Amrajuri-*ghat* at the foot of the Nilachal Hills. It may be recalled that Ram Singha had planned to take his cavalry through a breach in that spot for a land attack, and was thus carrying horses and men in the Mughal ships. This plan being aborted due to the failure to breach the spot, and coming under heavy cannon fire from the Assamese war-boats which attacked like a pack of wolves a buffalo, the Mughal fleet retreated to Juria on the north bank.

A double encounter now took place on land and water near Aswakranta. The Assamese under Laluk Bargohain Phukan and the Hazarikas defeated the advancing Mughal soldiers on the north bank. But the Mughal fleet, quickly sailing from Juria towards Aswakranta, worsted the cannonading Assamese war-boats which had rushed towards them from Amrajuri, coercing them to retreat to Barhila, north of Saraighat. This, in turn, disheartened the land army, which also had to retreat to avoid encirclement. ⁽¹⁸⁴⁾

"It was a river-battle the likes of which the hoary Luit had never seen! The whole of the Brahmaputra at the triangle between Kamakhya, Itakhuli and Aswakranta grew cluttered with boats; the flashes and thunder-claps of cannons being fired filled the air; drowning out the cries

for help of men struggling in the waters. The red waters of the Brahmaputra turned even redder with human blood. Though, on the north bank, the men under Atan Buragohain were gaining the upper hand, those towards the south bank had been demoralized at not finding Lachit at the head. Soon the results of this demoralization began to unfurl against the Ahoms; one after another their boats gave way before the Mughal onslaught and then turned and fled. With the reek of impending defeat befouling the air, boatmen at Itakhuli began transferring the Barphukan's personal effects to their crafts for the inevitable departure for Kaliabar." (185)

The Assamese situation had become so precarious that Barneog Hazarika, responsible for protecting the fortification of the river-*ghat* at Pandu, sent a messenger to his Commander-in-Chief asking what he should do. Lachit sought to raise the morale of his troops and boatmen by proclaiming a message "to all land and naval forces" through a herald who proclaimed: "I, Lachit Barphukan, have bought a piece of land on the Chila Hill by paying only four cowries. I am not leaving the place now, as my term of life is not yet over; and if I go at all, I would do so only after my people have gone." (186)

The implication of the words was straightforward, their import clear to even the least intelligent among his men — Lachit would stay put and defend his country even if it cost him his life! The Commander-in-Charge, Nara Hazarika, rushed from Sindurighopa fort to Aswakranta and knelt before the retreating soldiers, exclaiming: "O my countrymen, do please flee if you want to pour poison on this platter of gold!" But such appeals by subordinates appeared not to have swayed the soldiers and boatmen. That several boatmen took it upon themselves to load the

belongings of Atan Buragohain from the fort at Lathia Parbat and those of Lachit Barphukan from Itakhuli added to the prevalent confusion; the sight of their Commander-in-Chief's own belongings being carried up the Brahmaputra towards Lataasil demoralized the common soldiers even further. Clearly, what was required was the mantle of leadership being taken up by Lachit himself and that his men personally see him at the forefront! ⁽¹⁸⁷⁾

Disaster was imminent, there was not a moment to be lost! Lachit had four of his *Bhuyan-powali* retainers carry him upon his sick-bed up to the gatehouse of Itakhuli fort. The sight from there was even disheartening. One by one the Assamese boats were turning away from the advancing enemy *ghurabs* in a clear attempt to flee. Lachit ordered his own boat, together with six other war-vessels, to be brought to the landing pier. Supported by his men, he was about to walk down the steps to his boat when his astrologer, Achyutananda Doloï restrained him. The time, he asserted, was not auspicious for such a move!

Had it been anyone else, Lachit would have struck down the man at that very moment, so urgent was the need for action. The life, liberty and freedom of his motherland was at stake, the Assamese people were staring down the barrel of a humiliating defeat that may bring on them eternal servitude — and here was this venerable man conveying a warning from the scriptures that any endeavour commenced at that precise moment was destined to be unsuccessful! It was imperative that he proceed to the head of the battle and give a signal for a renewed attack, yet he could not bring himself to defy his astrologer.

As an Ahom, he had been conditioned from childhood to heed the advice of astrologers, who not only had a high place in the royal court, but also were regarded with

reverential awe and deference by society. Elaborate treatises existed delineating the use of astrology in any political or military campaign. All leading members of the nobility, civil or military, had to have a personal *Daivajna* or soothsayer attached to his entourage; in fact, the Ahom *Swargadeos* themselves had ordained that no vital action that would affect the State were to be taken without getting their clearance. As one of the highest official of the State, Lachit could not go against such a royal decree, no matter how desperate the situation might be. ⁽¹⁸⁸⁾

However, not even in such a crucial moment did Lachit doubt the sagacity of his astrologer, or suspect that Achyutananda had been bribed by the Mughals to restrain him. Yet his despair made him cry out: "O, Achyutananda, I shall take off your head without waiting for his Majesty's orders!" But the man refused to budge. Fresh intelligence of the looming disaster was being intimidated to Lachit every minute, even as he waited at the steps of the boarding pier. Once again in sheer frustration Lachit cried out: "The Moguls are almost at Amrajuri! O, astrologer, you have paved the way for your annihilation, brought about my disgrace, and destroyed my bread!" ⁽¹⁸⁹⁾

But, at last, Achyutananda announced: "I have found in my *Swarodoi* that the auspicious moment to attack has arrived. It was at this time that Ramchandra attacked Ravan." The Barphukan wasted no time. Supported by his trusted menial Nadai of Kharangi, he boarded his boat, and his flotilla comprising the six-other war-vessels rowed quickly towards the cannonading Mughal ships. ⁽¹⁹⁰⁾

On encountering a fleeing Assamese boatload of soldiers Lachit ordered that his own boat intercept it. He shouted at the panic-stricken men: "His Majesty has given me the supreme command of the army here and placed at

my disposal vast stores of provisions so that I might fight the enemy. Should I now desert the fight and revert to the embraces of my wives and children? How dare these serfs of boatmen venture to row up the river without my orders?" It is said that he then proceeded to hammer four oarsmen with the blunt edge of his sword and flung them into the water before ordering his own barge to proceed on its mission. But he did not interfere when the compatriots of the fallen boatmen rescued them from a possible watery grave.

The news that the Commander-in-Chief was once again at the helm of his army spread among the troops like wildfire, galvanizing them into renewed action. The news of the severity and promptness with which he had dealt with some of the recalcitrant men too spread, the narrative changing from mouth to mouth and taking on an increasingly fearful hue and inducing terror and consternation in the hearts of the soldiers. A terror-inspiring rumour began to circulate that the Barphukan, in order to prevent the soldiers from fleeing the battle arena, had begun to indiscriminately behead men guilty of such treachery. From his perch at the bow of his war-boat, *hengdang* in hand, Lachit roused his soldiers with an electrifying battle-cry: "Let the Mughals capture me alive, and let my people go home in peace."⁽¹⁹¹⁾ He ordered all the boats in his flotilla to launch an assault on the Mughal armada. Seeing this, fleeing boats turned around and rushed into the thick of the battle in support of their leader; soldiers on the bank began to shoot arrows and muskets into those stationed on the Mughal war-vessels.⁽¹⁹²⁾

"The Barphukan boarded a boat accompanied by six other war-vessels to launch a counter-attack with artillery by rallying the army and navy. The sight of their ailing

General conducting operations instilled courage among the wavering Assamese fighters who now swelled his fleet from both banks. Reinforcements also came under the Saringia Phukan, the Neogkataki and many Hazarikas from Rangmahal. The Assamese warships smashed into the thick of the Mughal fleet then stationed on the waters at Amrajuri, on the northern bank of the river opposite Kamakhya Hill. It was a keenly contested battle. One fought for aggression and glory of victory. The other fought for life and *patria*, the independence of the country. The issue was a foregone conclusion. The Mughals could not stand the well-planned and well-conducted Assamese attack. The right-angled triangle of the Brahmaputra (Itakhuli-Kamakhya-Aswakranta region) became a complicated tangle of boats and men battling to save themselves from drowning.

“The Assamese spanned the Brahmaputra by an ‘improvised bridge’ of boats placed side by side. They also resorted to a wily trick, combining a frontal charge with a surprise attack from behind, that proved decisive. The Barphukan pretended to attack the Mughal fleet from the front with some men on a few ships and lure it forward and then stabbed it from behind with the main army and fleet. Unaware of the danger lurking in his rear the Mughal admiral, Sarif Khan, smoking his *hookah* (hubble-bubble), advanced forward, only to be killed by a gunshot from behind. The suddenness of the event threw the entire Mughal fleet out of gear and it retreated. The panic-stricken army could not be recalled to order. This marked the end of the battle (middle of March, 1671). For the Mughals, who suffered heavy casualties with three top-ranking *Amirs*, 4000 dead and wounded, it was not merely a defeat but a disaster.” (193)

It had, indeed been the check-mate in what had turned out to be a long drawn game of chess! The Ahom *buranjis* have it that the Barphukan himself chased the fleeing Mughal army down to Pandu, some three miles down from Saraighat which had been the primary theatre of the naval battle, and wanted to chase them even further, but was dissuaded from doing so by Achyutananda Doloi who perhaps appreciated how ill Lachit had been. But the other ships of his fleet continued the chase till it became apparent that the Mughals will not be returning soon, if at all! ⁽¹⁹⁴⁾

The noble and large-hearted Rajput General, Raja Ram Singha, was ever gracious in defeat, and praised the valour and skill of his adversaries. "Every Assamese soldier is an expert in rowing boats," he is reported to have said, "in shooting arrows, in digging trenches, and in wielding guns and cannons. I have not seen such specimens of versatility in any part of India. One who comes to fight against Assam should be thrashed on the cheek by scavengers with their broomsticks!" ⁽¹⁹⁵⁾





THE AFTERMATH

A concatenation of circumstances had cumulatively resulted in the victory of Lachit Barphukan and the Assamese in the Battle of Saraighat which finally saw an irrevocable end to the invasions by the Mughals from the west. Decidedly, of course, Assam's Braveheart Lachit Barphukan was one of the differentiating factors between the invasion of Mir Jumla and that of Ram Singha, the other two being the dynamic monarch Chakradhwaj Singha and the astute warrior-diplomat Atan Buragohain. This triumvirate constituted an unprecedented, unbeatable combination — the monarch gave his full support, Atan and Lachit framed the strategy, with the latter providing the charisma which could rouse the innate courage of the most cowardly of soldiers!

While Chakradhwaj Singha was fortunate to find a man of Lachit's calibre to lead the campaign against the Mughals, Lachit was fortunate in having Chakradhwaj Singha as his king! This monarch epitomised self-respect and patriotism and chafed at the humiliation being heaped upon him because of the actions of his predecessor on the Ahom throne. When pressed to pay the remaining part of the war indemnity enjoined by the 1663 treaty of

Ghiladharighat, with the Mughal envoys treating him as a vassal, he is reported to have cried out: "Death is preferable to a life of subordination to the foreigners!" But, far from wallowing in self-pity like his predecessor, he took concrete and practical steps to avenge the humiliation by ousting the foreigners from the soil of his kingdom.

He himself supervised the preparations for the campaign and personally ensured that the soldiers and naval personnel were well trained and well equipped. Despite his occasional bouts of petulance at the slow progress being made in combating the enemy force commanded by Ram Singha, thereby becoming indirectly responsible for the tragic debacle at Alaboi, he offered full support to the campaign throughout, rejoicing at victories achieved and rewarding the achievers. When his objective of retaking Gauhati and sending the Mughals packing out of Assam was attained, he is said to have cried out: "It is now that I can eat my morsel of food with ease and pleasure."

"Chakradhwaj Singha would not allow himself to be demoralised into inaction by the sad plight of his country. He regarded the present situation to be a solitary deviation from Assam's uninterrupted career of victory over foreigners. This self-confidence was translated into vigorous practical measures for the expulsion of the Mughals from Gauhati and Kamrup. His letters to his allies breathe this energy of mind and grim determination to win victory..... To both Jaydhwaj Singha and Chakradhwaj Singha the humiliating results of Mir Jumla's invasion were a prelude to more vigorous action, greater organisation, and more systematic marshalling of the country's resources not only of men and material but also of the incipient patriotism and the dormant potentiality of the nation." (196)

No accolades could be enough for the statesman-warrior Atan Buragohain, whose tact and wisdom complimented the dash and energy shown by Lachit. The preparations being made to wage war with the Mughals were carried out under his monitoring and the Ahom chronicles mention that he toured the length and breadth of the kingdom to seek out resources for the counter-attack. This officer was not afraid to go against the wishes of the king himself if these seemed to him to be unwise. It may be recalled that Chakradhwaj Singha had sought to launch that counter-attack immediately after being snubbed by the Mughal envoys, but the Buragohain dissuaded him from pursuing such a premature action. He had then acknowledged that "the high-handed imperiousness of the Mughals has transcended the limits of forbearance," yet pragmatically had added: "we must provide the army with sufficient quantity of food provisions and war materials, and must hold in stock sufficient reserve to enable us to replenish the stores of the expeditionary army as soon as they became empty." (197)

Time and again his sagacious counsel to the king and the Commander-in-Chief came of great use during the campaign, and proved to be vital towards the attainment of the final objective. For example, the way he offered consolation to Lachit after the Alaboi disaster was responsible for bringing out the Commander-in-Chief from a state of inertia-inducing depression. It was he who phrased the communication messages to be sent to the enemy camp, and assisted in framing the strategy during the meetings of the war-council. He was a strong believer in having a centralised command structure and co-ordination between the various wings of the army. Being a military engineer of repute, he played a significant role in

raising the defensive structure around Gauhati and deploying Commanders and soldiers in accordance to the *pali* system. But, above all, apart from being a statesman, he was a warrior too, and led with great success the army on the north bank all through the campaign from his base at Lathia Parvat.

A Commander-in-Chief is only as good as the Commanders under him and Lachit was fortunate to have a band of extremely loyal and capable subordinate officers who, inspired by the same love for the motherland shown by their leaders, displayed courage beyond the call of duty. They resisted all attempts by Ram Singha to insert disaffection and disunity amongst them and remained incorruptible to any overtures or inducement offered by the enemy. Equally moved by the patriotic impulse to do everything in their power was displayed by the Katakis or envoys who were sent to the Mughal camp. Not only did they guard the Assamese camp's secrets fiercely, they also attempted to paint an exaggerated picture of the resources of their Commander-in-Chief so as to demoralise the Mughal General. The lies fed by Rani Kataki and Kalia Kataki about "*Rakshasas* or demons" among the Assamese forces, or those of Madhabcharan Kataki who spoke about numerous Chieftains of the mountains who had become allies of Lachit did serve to dishearten the Mughal soldiers.

Above all, the Assamese soldiers who fought in the campaign to oust the Mughals from their motherland showed the kind of grit and resolve not shown earlier during the Mir Jumla invasion. Ram Singha could hardly conceive that these soldiers were, in fact, ordinary farmers or artisans conscripted under the *paik* system who had undergone a brief course of military training, which explains his

encomium: "I have not seen such specimens of versatility in any other part of India." The discipline and incorruptibility of the Assamese soldiers were instrumental in administering the most humiliating defeat on the mighty Mughals. It may be noted that at a most critical moment, when they were on the verge of fleeing, the sight of Lachit coming to lead them had fired them up, inducing them to turn around once more and rout the enemy!

"The fortification of Gauhati and the climatic and natural conditions of Assam provided the local army an impenetrable shield of protection. But the cohesion and integrity of the Assamese, their fierce determination to win victory, their farsightedness, their organization and their discipline, and the matchless leadership of their Commanders, proved a more insurmountable barrier, which neither the wealth of Delhi and Amber, nor the strategy of the Rajputs could disrupt and overthrow..... This invincible spirit was the result of the example of the leaders. The King was determined to win victory, and his Captains were animated by the same resolution. The monarch exercised control over the General, and spurred him to speedy and decisive actions; and the Premier feared the General, though he checked the latter's impetuosity when such checking was imperative. There was no acrimony or hidden discontent in the relations of these supreme leaders; they acted with one single, undivided purpose — the victory of the Assamese army; and in pursuing this common objective they obliterated all traces of their ego. They transmitted their spirit to the subordinate Commanders, and the latter to their soldiers and camp-followers. The whole Assamese nation, from the king down to the meanest peasant, acted like one man. That was a sight for the gods to see; and to the Assamese, it is a

perennial source of inspiration in all future measures of rehabilitation and progress.” (198)



Apart from the above, there were also subsidiary factors which resulted in the defeat of Raja Ram Singha and the final, definitive end to the threat posed by the Mughals. The fact that the Rajput Raja was a reluctant Commander, and Emperor Aurangzeb had displayed doubtful wisdom in selecting him for the Assam campaign, has already been mentioned. Moreover, he was not motivated in any way to make a success of the campaign apart from the fact that as a Rajput a defeat would be tantamount to lowering of his stature. Nor were his Commanders or his soldiers inspired by the need to embark on attaining objectives which were dear to their hearts. On the other hand patriotism was the potent motivating force for the Assamese, one which empowered them to ward off the invader.

The nucleus of the Assamese army consisted of the levies trained at Garhgaon under the personnel supervision of King Chakradhwaj Singha; then there were the contingents permanently stationed at Gauhati and the neighbouring garrisons; and these two units were reinforced by the detachments sent by vassal Chieftains, the Jayantia Raja and other allies. There were besides the vast militia of the adult population of Assam who could be mobilised at short notice and despatched to the theatre of war. Sir Jadunath Sarkar's statement that the Ahoms could muster one hundred thousand men is very near the truth. It is supported by a news-letter of the court of Aurangzeb dated 10th December, 1669 where occurs the following passage

— “The Emperor asked the mace-bearer Nisar Beg, who had returned after conveying an imperial letter to the Subadar of Bengal, what the strength of the enemy in Assam was. He replied that the Raja (Ram Singha) had said that their foot and horse soldiers totalled about one lakh, out of which the cavalry was very small in number.” (199)

The vast number at Lachit Barphukan’s disposal enabled him to post one armed soldier at an interval of 13 1/2 feet on the summits and slopes of hills, and nine feet on the ramparts of the plains connecting the hills. The arrangement was maintained throughout the whole ring of fortifications on both banks of the river Brahmaputra. On account of the deficiency of his army Ram Singha was compelled to fight very carefully as he could not afford to lose his soldiers in indiscriminate and unprofitable attacks. Besides we are told that his losses were seldom replenished. (200)

Also, against the over 300 *ghurabs* in Mir Jumla’s navy, Ram Singha reportedly had only 40, an inadequate number considering the importance the naval forces acquired towards the end of the campaign. As stated by historian Jadunath Sarkar, “Unlike the time of Mir Jumla’s invasion, the mastery of the water now belonged to the Assamese, and the Mughals could do little with the 40 war-vessels on the Brahmaputra.” (201)

But the number of warships in the armada of Ram Singha varies in accounts depicted in different Ahom and Mughal chronicles, and it is possible that their numbers could have been higher than stated. “Ram Singha is said to have brought with him only forty war-vessels, whereas Mir Jumla had at his disposal, at the very beginning of his march, 323 war-vessels of all kinds mostly manned by Portuguese, English and Dutch sailors.” (202)

Ram Singha might have strengthened his fleet in Assam, since there were two famous dockyards in the neighbourhood of Hajo, one at Ramdia and the other at Sualkuchi. On one occasion, during his campaign in Assam, Ram Singha captured a number of Assamese vessels, and despatched a fleet of 500 boats against the enemy. This fleet carried big guns, and their prows were described as "sixteen mouthed." (203)

In one chronicle Ram Singha is said to have engaged 72 war-vessels in the naval battle of Saraighat. In another, it has been said that there was such a heavy congestion of boats on the waters of the Brahmaputra on that occasion that it was difficult for a vessel to make any headway owing to the lack of moving space. The Assamese during that engagement constructed a bridge of boats across the Brahmaputra connecting the two banks of the river at Gauhati. (204)

The number of Assamese boats in Gauhati of this period cannot be precisely known, though we may surmise that there were any number of vessels as was necessary. There were numerous *nao-saals* or dockyards in Assam and the boat-building industry was highly developed. There were two *khels* or guilds the members of which were engaged solely in boat-building and boat-plying, the Naosalia *khel* and the Nao-baicha *khel*. The creation of a powerful and numerous Assamese navy was made possible by the vast forest resources of the kingdom which supplied excellent timber for boats. (205)

It may also be noted that the huge and unwieldy *ghurabs* had to move upstream against the fast and powerful currents of the Brahmaputra, which perceptibly slowed them down. Their mammoth size of around 50 metres were suited more for oceanic plying rather than a river. In

comparison, the Assamese *hiloichara* and *bacchari* war-boats were small, measuring only about 20 metre in length and around 3 metres in width. They could attack the Mughal ships in packs from all sides, the cannons mounted on them inflicting heavy damage. The Commanders of the Mughal warships, though veterans in fighting wars elsewhere, were unfamiliar with the Brahmaputra's flow pattern, which put them at a disadvantage when compared to the Assamese oarsmen, who were familiar with the manner in which the river flowed. The *ghurabs* had also to be towed by smaller boats when in battle, and also by men pulling at ropes while the army was on the march, which proved weary and exhaustive to the soldiers engaged in the task.

"The difficulties experienced by the Mughals during Mir Jumla's invasion have been very well summarised by Charles Stewart who drew his material from contemporary Persian sources. 'As Mir Jumla was resolved not to quit sight of his fleet,' wrote Charles Stewart, 'on which were embarked his stores and depot of provisions, he regained the banks of the Brahmaputra; and having crossed that river near Rangamati, at the expense of great labour and much delay, he formed a road which enabled him to proceed by short stages. During this march, as the imperial army was obliged to drag the boats against the strong currents, and the troops were necessitated to cross rivers and clamber over precipices, it frequently happened that their day's journey did not exceed one or two miles, during which time, although not opposed by the enemy in front, they were often annoyed on their flanks by small parties of Assamese firing on them from behind trees, or whatever the nature of the ground permitted them to approach unseen.'" (206)

Ram Singha's experiences in the "most wearisome march"

could not be very much different from those of his predecessor. ⁽²⁰⁷⁾

Apart from the rigours associated with a march towards Assam, which the foot-soldiers had to undertake often through swampy marshlands on river banks rather than dry ground, the warm and muggy climate of Assam, as also the various pestilences associated with the region in medieval times, told on the constitutions of the Mughal soldiers who were unused to this type of an environment. Nor could they cope with the mind-games engaged in by the Assamese, tactics even the veterans among them who had participated in conflicts in other parts of Mughal India had never encountered before. Added to this were the long periods of rains, which induced slush and mud and occasionally flash-floods, dampness of the camps and constant irritation by insects, leeches, snakes et al, little wonder that it did not take long for demoralization to set in among the Mughal soldiers!

Among the many handicaps confronted by Raja Ram Singha was the absence of a capable deputy who could be entrusted with full responsibility without his actions and decisions having to be monitored by the Commander-in-Chief. Unlike Mir Jumla, who had an intrepid deputy in Dilir Khan Daudzai, Ram Singha had no one to whom he could turn to in crucial moments of the campaign. Here again the myopia, perhaps wilful, of Aurangzeb in selecting Rashid Khan as the second-in-command of the Mughal forces was evident. Rashid Khan was not only absolutely untrustworthy, but also insolent and insubordinate, which coerced his Chief to evict him from the main Mughal encampment. Given that Rashid Khan had been the Faujadar of Gauhati for some years and personally knew some of the Assamese Commanders from previous days,

Ram Singha's suspicions that he was colluding with the enemy might not have been ill-founded. In contrast, his adversary, Lachit Barphukan not only had the sagacious warrior-statesman Atan Buragohain as his second-in-command, but also a set of extremely loyal, patriotic and efficient officers upon whom he could bestow important duties without the slightest hesitation.

Above all, it had been the differences in the qualities of the army's apex leaders which determined the course of the two campaigns. Mir Jumla possessed all the positive attributes of a self-made man, the enterprise and ambition, which had enabled him to rise from being a petty adventurer to an individual of stature who could ultimately almost match Mughal royalty in his wealth and power. On the other hand, despite being a Rajput and having attained some fame as a warrior, Ram Singha had been brought up under the shadow of the famous Jai Singha, and he neither got much of an opportunity to display any initiative or quality of enterprising leadership. Not being much of a strategist, and lacking adequate guidance in waging a campaign in a remote and strange land, confronting a defensive fortification he had never encountered before, Ram Singha appeared out of his depth, and could not summon up the imagination required to chart out a strategy to breach the near-perfect Assamese defences.

Mir Jumla had been fortunate in invading at a time when the Assamese leadership was in disarray, with the officers responsible for the defence of Gauhati actually assisting him during his onslaught on Upper Assam. In contrast Raja Ram Singha had to confront a united, incorruptible Assamese army under a resolute Ahom monarch, and could not attain the objective sought for by Emperor Aurangzeb. It needs to be noted that, after

launching an initial onslaught on the Assamese fortifications, he did not sustain the assault and try to take it to a decisive conclusion, but instead resorted to a strategy that was an admixture of diplomacy and attempts at bribery and spread of disinformation, which explains the drawn out nature of his campaign. The Rajput General was no match to the wily strategist Lachit, who slowly but surely drew him towards the watery trap laid out for him!

“A question arises in the mind of the reader, what would have happened if Mir Jumla had come in 1669? It is, therefore, necessary to compare two conflicting armies as regards the spirit animating them, their respective organisations and methods. The fundamental factor was that the contest was between two opposed principles or ideologies. While the Mughals came only for imperialistic expansion, the Assamese fought for life and liberty, the Government carrying the people with them. It was a conflict between imperialism, championed by loyalist Rajput honour on the one hand, and the revised spirit of patriotism or if we may call it, conscious nationalism, on the other. Surveying the vast assemblage of the Mughal hosts, Lachit Barphukan could not restrain his tears and his monologue has become classic in Assamese *buranji* literature..... The General's spirit animated the entire army of Assam. Even Mir Jumla had some ambitions of his own to earn everlasting renown as a world conqueror. Ram Singha had, apart from loyalty, no idealism to inspire him, over and above promotion in service. This basic weakness in the Mughal position affected the final issue of the war notwithstanding isolated triumphs of the Mughals.” (208)



Though the entire area of the Brahmaputra River adjacent to Gauhati was an arena for the climactic battle between the Assamese forces led by Lachit Barphukan and those of the Mughals under Raja Ram Singha, the primary zone where the naval engagement took a dramatic turn was the portion nearer to Saraighat, slightly downstream of the port-city. Thus it has been enshrined in Assam's history as the Battle of Saraighat. The officers stationed at Gauhati were called Saraighatians and the officers who participated in the victory began to be called Saraighat veterans! This battle, indubitably, was the most dramatic conflict recorded in Assam's medieval history, and has not only attained cult status, but also continues to inspire the people of Assam.

Lachit retained his alertness against a possible counter-attack by Ram Singha for quite a while after this battle. "The Assamese remained prepared for action thinking that Ram Singha's retreat might be a mere ruse. The Mughals during the entire night after the battle had been engaged in eating. The Assamese spies suspecting that Ram Singha might re-attack Gauhati on the morrow reported the matter to Lachit Barphukan. The General ordered the posting of relays of messengers at short intervals so that he might remain constantly informed of the movements of the enemy. He enjoined upon the Prime Minister and other Commanders to remain ready for action. Achyutananda Doloi was consulted as to the real motive of the Mughals. The Doloi replied half jestingly, "today we shall amuse ourselves at the sight of an interesting scene." The spies then informed the Barphukan: "There is no question of attack. The Mughals have folded up their tents and put them in the boats. They are preparing to sail down the river."⁽²⁰⁹⁾

While Lachit chastised his retainers and servants for having prepared for evacuation from Itakhuli, and transporting his personal belongings to boats, since it may be thought that he had given order for this to be done, thereby casting a slur on his reputation, the Assamese Commander-in-Chief's attitude towards the fleeing Mughal forces was more benign. He gave instructions to his own men who were pursuing Ram Singha's forces not to engage with them, but retain a distance and not fire cannons or shoot arrows at them. When the enemy went beyond the Manas River, the pursuers were instructed to immediately reoccupy that former Assamese outpost, fortify it and maintain vigil there.

The detachment entrusted to do so sought permission to fall upon the enemy and seize provisions and articles. Lachit expressly forbade the soldiers from doing so and appropriating booty. "They are sailing down the river," he told them, "overpowered and disgraced, though they fought for one full year. I do not want to tarnish the fair name of my king and my ministers by plundering the fugitive soldiers." When some of the Phukans and Rajkhowas persisted with their request the Barphukan offered the following advice: "If we could have attacked them, well and good. But remember the terrible consequences we had experienced by aggressively attacking Ram Singha at Alaboi. You have first to ascertain the strength of the fugitive army. Take heed of the consequences and do as you please." This sage counsel was agreed upon by the officers and they ceased putting forward this proposal. (210)

However, the intelligent Lachit understood all too well that the danger to Lower Assam and Gauhati was far from over, and Raja Ram Singha, perhaps bolstered by fresh

reinforcements from Dhaka or Delhi, might launch another attack even after retreating to his bastion at Rangamati. Thus his Commanders and soldiers could not let their guard down and remain vigilant for a possible counter-attack. His efficient spy-system remained activated as long as the threat posed by the presence of Raja Ram Singh just a stone's throw away from the Assam border was there. For a few months after the Rajput General's retreat Lachit, despite not having recovered fully from his illness, oversaw the repairs to the fortifications at Gauhati, redeployment of his forces and replenishment of arms, boats, provisions etc. Detachment of soldiers were also sent to the numerous garrisons between the border outpost at Manas and Gauhati.

When the Ahom monarch Udayaditya Singha received the news of the triumph of his Barphukan over the enemy, he was overjoyed, and rewarded all the Commanders instrumental in ousting the enemy forces from Assam with valuable presents. Nara Hazarika, who had knelt before the fleeing soldiers at Aswakranta was given a purse of one thousand rupees. The astrologer Achyutananda Doloi, who had been appointed astrologer-in-chief of the Barphukan with the title of *Bar-Doloi*, and had eleven *Pati-Dolois* or junior astrologers under him, too was rewarded with "the title of *Samudra-Khari*, a pair of *gamkharu* or spangled bangles, a sacred thread of gold, and the daughter of Aladibari Gossain of Kamrup as wife, and 120 families of slaves as part of the marriage gifts. The eleven *Pati-Dolois* were promoted to the rank of *Bar-Dolois*. These twelve families of *Bar-Dolois* were entitled to equal precedence and honour at the court of the Ahom monarch." ⁽²¹¹⁾

Raja Ram Singha had commenced his retreat in the first week of April, 1671 CE, and it is recorded that he made a stop at Hajo, where he prayed at the temple of

Hayagriva-Madhava. It is also recorded that he told the Brahmin priests of that temple: "The Barnabab (Barphukan) is not a hero of an ordinary calibre; the fortifications are complex and intricate: and I could not therefore obtain any loophole for attack." ⁽²¹²⁾

Though Lachit had prepared his defences for any eventuality, as developments turned out, Raja Ram Singha did not get another opportunity because after his defeat at the hands of the Assamese forces the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb lost all faith in him, and would not give him further assistance so that he could launch an attack upon the ever vigilant defenders of Assam. This is reflected in the *farman* sent by the Emperor, which virtually incapacitated Ram Singha of exercising any power and turned him from being a General of the mighty Mughal army into a mere informer!

"*HusubulHukum* (by order)," the *farman* read. "Know ye, Raja Ram Singha who is expecting imperial favour, that from the contents of the letters of Shaista Khan and of those sent by Zafar Khan deceased, which were placed before the Emperor, he has come to learn that the capture of the fort of Gauhati cannot be accomplished swiftly. So it is useless to send further reinforcements there to equal their army in this work..... Askar Khan should himself collect the aforesaid army and come back to the imperial court. After his arrival you should grant leave to the following..... Rao Amar Singha, Chandrawat, Keshari Singha, Bhojraj Kachchwa and others, whose contingents have been separately noted, so that they might also accompany the said Khan to the imperial court. And you should stick to your post with as much army of that excellent province as necessary for the Empire. Further, along with the soldiers assigned to you in that province

and artillery and other materials, you should stay at Rangamati and from the border act as informer (*khabardar*)....”

In February, 1676, through another *farman*, the Emperor directed Ram Singha to come back from Rangamati before the rainy season set in, handing over charge to a person to be nominated by Umdat-ul-Mulk. First Abu Nasr Khan and later Ibn-i-Hussain Khan took charge of that Mughal outpost, while Raja Ram Singha sailed back to Delhi and paid his respects to Aurangzeb in June, 1676. The fact that he had to spend over five years in a state of exile at Rangamati was considered to be a form of punishment for the Rajput warrior. According to one account Raja Ram Singha died a natural death after his return to the Mughal capital, while another account has it that he died on duty in Kabul around 1687-88. ⁽²¹³⁾

The Comprehensive History of Assam gives a slightly different account of the subsequent events: “The Assamese secured another victory by a surprise attack on a retreating party of the Mughals, who were all killed. The Mughals in Darrang were also worsted. Weakened by repeated defeats and consequent losses and losing all hope of recovering imperial grace by defeating the Ahom monarch, Ram Singha left Kamrup in early April 1671 and returned to Rangamati. The general rout at Saraighat and subsequent retreat, duly reported by Hazi Mir Ghazar Beg, the Assam reporter, so enraged the Emperor that he at once demoted the Rajput general by 2000 and ordered his recall. Accordingly, he handed over charge to Abu Nisar Khan and had audience with the Emperor on 25 June, 1676.” ⁽²¹⁴⁾



The jubilation felt by the entire Ahom kingdom at the victory at Saraighat was dampened by a sad news not very long afterwards. This was the death of Assam's Braveheart, Lachit Barphukan, at the comparatively young age of 59. The chronicles are none too clear about the exact time and place of his death. As we know, he had been in a state of high fever at the height of the Saraighat conflict, but his indomitable spirit, mental strength and determination to save his motherland had driven him into action, something that his body perhaps could not withstand. It is thought that by a section of historians that he breathed his last while being transported by boat from Gauhati to Garhgaon.

But another section of historians avers that Lachit died naturally in 1672, one year after the Battle of Saraighat, and he was buried in a mausoleum built by Swargadeo Udayaditya Singha at the Narahilaydari village in the Hoolungapara Mauza, 16 km from the Upper Assam town of Jorhat. ⁽²¹⁵⁾ It is but natural that, due to the absence of primary documented sources, a majority of historians desist from mentioning the dates of Lachit's birth and death.

Noted historian Suryya Kumar Bhuyan wrote in his book *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, "But for his timely intervention the failing enthusiasm of the Assamese soldier would have purchased an ignoble defeat. Lachit Barphukan, Like Lord Nelson, died in the lap of victory; and the Battle of Saraighat was Assam's Trafalgar."



Lachit's elder brother, Laluksola, was appointed as the new Barphukan. Once again the river Manas became the western boundary of the Ahom realm. On the bank of the river, at a place called Hadira, an Ahom army outpost

and trading centre was set up and it began to be called the Hadirachowki by the local people. Since it marked the outer bound of the Ahom Empire, people from outside began calling it the Assamchowki, and it soon developed into an important trading centre. The Assamese garrison stationed at that place built a fort on a nearby hill so that they could shelter in it during the period of heavy rains. A high ranking officer was placed at the Assamchowki to administer the area and regulate trade with the outside world. Rangamati continued to be the acknowledged Mughal administrative headquarters for the region.



The Battle of Saraighat spelled the end of over a century long Mughal attempts at conquering Assam and lent a final deathblow to their aspirations. The irony that this happened during the reign of Emperor of Aurangzeb, when Mughal imperial power was at its height, and the Mughal Empire was at its most extensive, would not be lost on historians! It may be recalled that, after the First Battle of Panipat in 1526, Babur, the founder of the Mughal Dynasty, had occupied the throne at Delhi, and his progeny began expanding the Empire erected by him. After the conquest of Bengal in 1576, the Mughals set their covetous eyes on Assam. For some decades the Koch Empire had stood as a buffer between them and the Ahom rulers of Assam. But when the Koch kingdom, which then included Lower Assam, was annexed by the Mughals, direct conflict between the two antagonists commenced.

One of the earliest encounters recorded in the Ahom *buranjis* was the April, 1532 battle between the forces of an invader named Turbak, a renegade, non-Mughal invader

from Bengal, and those of the Ahom king Suhungmung, with the latter emerging victorious. Since then there were a number of assaults by the Mughals, the most severe one, as mentioned earlier, being that of Mir Jumla. But the Battle of Saraighat so empowered the Assamese that, till the Ahom Empire itself was rendered vulnerable due to internal discord and invaders could intrude into Assam to create havoc, they could ward off any other possible assault. No doubt, just a decade after Saraighat, there was a reoccupation of Gauhati by the Mughals, but this had been made possible only because of the machinations of a treacherous, power-hungry Assamese noble. That the patriotism enkindled by the Battle of Saraighat was abiding was proved by the fact that Assamese soldiers were able to throw out the last usurpers in a matter of months.

“It (i.e. the Battle of Saraighat) left an undying legacy of unflinching bravery and unalloyed patriotism of the Assamese. It was again a decisive battle in the annals of Assam. Not only was the Mughal offensive hurled back, but the results of the sacrifices, past and present, were also preserved. True, a stealthy effort was made ten years later to penetrate into the same area through the backdoor, but the flood-tide of self-confidence and territorial patriotism engendered at Saraighat was strong enough to drive the invaders beyond the border. If Saraighat hurled back the Mughal in a defensive war, Itakhuli completed the work in an offensive war.” (216)



The final encounter with the Mughals was, in fact, related to the invasion by Ram Singha. The need to defend Gauhati and Lower Assam, which had been re-occupied

by Lachit, entailed that all the best and brightest officers be dispatched there, leaving Chakradhwaj Singha and after him Udayaditya Singha to rule from Garhgaon with only the petty, inferior officers. After the death of Chakradhwaj Singha these officers took advantage of the prevailing situation to appropriate all powers for themselves and embark on a ruthless campaign which not only saw the murder of Udayaditya, but also the killing or mutilation of around six princes who were put on the throne, in a matter of just eleven years, between the death of Chakradhwaj Singha in 1670 and accession of Gadadhar Singha in 1681.

Indeed, at Garhgaon, the 1670s were dark times, scarred by conspiracies, killings, betrayals — anarchy overtook what had been a well-ordered system of Government. The petty officials who were ruling the realm were afraid that once the higher minister returned to Garhgaon they would lose their authority; thus some of them tried to play king-maker in order to empower themselves. One petty officer in particular, named Lechai Debera Dakhinpatia Hazarika, within a very short span of time, succeeded in grabbing all power for himself, murdering Udayaditya Singha and elevating his brother, who took on the Ahom name of Suklampha and the Hindu name of Ramdhvaj Singha, to the throne.

However, the ambitious Lechai Debera, became dissatisfied that he was not being suitably rewarded by Ramdhvaj Singha, and craftily manoeuvred himself to the post of Barbarua. The years following this appointment were some of the most infamous in Ahom history, with the devilish Debera using his new found power to kill anyone who dared oppose him. Ahom *buranjis* state that on a single night he slaughtered no less than twenty four Hazarikas and all the Phukans attached to the palace!

When Swargadeo Ramdhvaj Singha finally tried to stand up to Debera, the latter secretly had him poisoned in November, 1674. Next Debera chose a man named Suhung, a little known Ahom prince who resided at Samaguri, assuming that such an insignificant individual could be easily controlled. But Suhung could not really be called a Swargadeo because none of the *patra-mantris* had agreed to his anointment, as Shan rules demanded, and thus many of the *buranjis* omit his name. Yet Suhung, disliking the overbearing attitude of Debera, too attempted to get rid of him and was assassinated by the ruthless Barbarua, who then placed a Tungkhungiya prince by the name of Gobar Gohain on the throne.

Soon the anarchic activities engaged in by Debera began to percolate to the ears of Laluksola Barphukan, who had assumed that office after the death of Lachit Barphukan, and Atan Buragohain, who were still at Gauhati. However, with Ram Singha still stationed at Rangamati with his troops, thereby posing a perpetual danger to the extended Ahom realm, they had not been in a position to turn their attention to Upper Assam. But towards the beginning of 1675, Ram Singha began preparations to depart back to Delhi, so the senior Ahom nobles could leave Gauhati for Garhgaon.

Atan Buragohain and Laluksola Barphukan, accompanied by some of the most valiant Ahom commanders who had fought so well during the campaign at Gauhati, set off in April, 1675 for Garhgaon at the head of a large force, having deputed Guimela Gohain-Phukan to manage the affairs of the river-port city. Faced with the prospect of confronting them Debera fled — he was captured, tried and found guilty and executed. Gobar

Gohain too was tried and executed on the 23rd of May, 1675, the period of his "reign" lasting barely a month.

Atan Buragohain spent some time in once again putting into place the traditional Ahom administrative structure, which had suddenly been disrupted by the actions of Debera. Having consulted the other *patra-mantris* a new king named Sujinpha, a descendent of Swargadeo Suhungmung the Dihingia Raja, was placed on the Ahom throne. But, fearful of the fate undergone by some of the preceding occupants of that throne, Sujinpha began to sniff conspiracy and treachery everywhere; worse still, against the advice of the Buragohain, he had princes of competing Ahom clans secretly murdered to ensure that his own sons would succeed him to the throne.

When Atan remonstrated, Sujinpha along with some sycophant nobles of the lower hierarchy, turned on the Buragohain, forcing him to escape from Garhgaon to Lakhau. There he was joined by other friendly nobles and together they defeated the army sent against them by Sujinpha. The king himself was put to the sword. Atan next chose a prince from the Parvatiya clan, and placed him on the Ahom throne, taking on the name of Sudaipha. But the new king, influenced by the forces inimical to the Buragohain, too turned against him

Meanwhile, news had reached the Buragohain that Laluksola Barphukan, who had returned to Gauhati along with his army, was displaying a friendly disposition towards the Mughal commanders stationed at Rangamati. Apparently, the Barphukan had become envious of the power the Buragohain commanded and was determined to grab that power for himself. In a startling development, the absence of the Premier from Gauhati had enabled the new Commander-in-Chief of Lower Assam, who harboured

ambitions of elevating himself to the throne at Garhgaon, to hatch a conspiracy. He began negotiations with Sultan Azamtara, Governor of Bengal, pledging to hand over Gauhati to the Mughals if only the Emperor at Delhi supported him in his attempt to wrest the Ahom throne. Laluksola carried out the negotiations through Baduli, the collaborator during the Mir Jumla days, who was living in Bengal, and his own niece, Ramani Gabharu, daughter of Jaydhwaj Singha, who it may be remembered had been sent to the imperial harem and married off to Sultan Azamtara, and renamed as Rahmat Banu Begum. Unfortunately, though aware of these developments, Atan could do nothing about it, the bulk of the Assamese standing armed forces, as also the cream amongst the officers, being posted at Gauhati to repulse any attempt by the Mughals to retake the port-city.

On 26th February, 1679, what Atan Buragohain had feared, became a reality! Laluksola Barphukan, elder brother of Lachit Barphukan, Assam's Braveheart who fought so valiantly to defend his motherland, proved to be a traitor on that fateful day, and to further his ambition to attain power, undid an achievements for which thousands of Assamese soldiers had died, and returned Gauhati and adjacent areas to the Mughals. On behalf of the Emperor at Delhi Mansur Khan entered Gauhati with a small fleet and occupied the city vacated by the Ahoms.

Three days earlier Laluksola and his band of loyal officers, accompanied by the entire Assamese force and flotilla assigned to guard the realm from Mughal assault, sailed up the Brahmaputra, its offensive now directed against Garhgaon itself. The resistance offered by Atan Buragohain was feeble; soon he and his men were overpowered by the traitor and arrested. Sudaipha was

executed and replaced by a prince named Sulikpha handpicked by Laluk. His first act on being enthroned was to order the execution of the Buragohain

Thus ended the life of the great statesman and patriot, Atan Buragohain — he was taken from incarceration at Duimunisila to a place in Kaliabar, and strangled! Now there was no stopping Laluk Barphukan, who discarded that title, and designated himself as Rajmantri Phukan. ⁽²¹⁷⁾

“The Sultan deputed Nawab Mansur Khan to take delivery of Gauhati; and in March 1679 Laluksola Barphukan made over Gauhati to the Mughals in return for a promised reward of four lakh rupees and an assurance of support for Laluk’s candidature for the throne of Assam. Mansur Khan was appointed Faujadar of the newly acquired territory. Laluk then marched up to Garhgaon, killed the Premier who had come to oppose his advance and set up on the throne a stripling of fourteen years, murdered Princess Jaymati, wife of Gadapani, for refusing to furnish information about the movements of her fugitive husband, and himself wielded virtual sovereign power. But the hand of Nemesis was working secretly behind the scene; and Laluk was murdered in November, 1680, by a disgruntled body of household retainers. The Ministers were now roused to a sense of patriotism; they made a search for Konwar Gadapani, the most valorous prince of the time, and placed him on the throne.” ⁽²¹⁸⁾

Gadapani, in August 1681, ascended the Ahom throne and took on the Ahom title of Supatpha and the Hindu name of Gadadhar Singha. He was determined to once again oust the Mughals under Mansur Khan, the Faujadar based in Gauhati. Towards the end of August, 1682, the Assamese began their last campaign against their arch enemies. Their forces departed in a three-pronged attack

— a huge flotilla of war-boats with Bandar Barphukan and Champa Paniphukan at the lead moved down the Brahmaputra; another flotilla led by Sandikoi Phukan and Khamrak Phukan swept down a branch of this river called Kalang; while a land force led by Halou Deka Phukan and Namdangia Phukan progressed down the south bank.

Even before Mansur Khan could organize any resistance the Mughal-occupied forts at Bansbari and Kajali fell. A Mughal flotilla sent by him clashed with that of the Assamese at the river Barnadi and suffered a decisive defeat. They did try to resist at Itakhuli in Gauhati, mounting cannons both at the fort and Umananda, but in vain. There was no stopping the Assamese forces who with nationalist cries continued their relentless advance. Finally, in September, 1682, Ali Akbar, the commander at Itakhuli, deserted his forces and fled; Mansur Khan had left even earlier for Rangamati. The Mughals were chased beyond the Manas River which once again became the westernmost boundary of the Ahom Empire. A vast booty was captured along with numerous war-vessels — gold and silver, elephants, horses, bullocks and buffaloes, cannons, guns, swords and spears. The ease with which the Assamese force expelled the Mughals was a clear indication of the impact of the Battle of Saraighat which taught the Commanders the strategy to be adopted against the enemy, and also infused them and their soldiers with the sense of nationalism which Lachit had toiled so indefatigably to inspire. ⁽²¹⁹⁾





THE LEGACY OF LACHIT

Often a particular historical event has far-reaching outcomes and becomes an epoch-maker. Historians are unanimous in acknowledging that the Battle of Saraighat led by Assam's Braveheart Lachit Barphukan was one such conclusive episode in the history of medieval Assam, which left an abiding legacy both in the immediate aftermath as also in the centuries that followed.

Its impact in the immediate aftermath is unquestionable. No doubt, due to certain negative factors, the decade immediately following the Saraighat Battle, marked by the dominance of villainous characters like Debera and Laluksola, and the dastardly assassination of the valiant warrior-statesman Atan Buragohain, became an aberration. Yet, as soon as Prince Gadapani was placed on the Ahom throne in August, 1681, he took control, reclaimed the territories so treacherously given away by Laluksola Barphukan, and restored peace and order in the kingdom. A new era of peace and development was ushered in and the Ahom Empire reached its pinnacle of economic prosperity and cultural achievements in the course of the next century. The Tungkhungiya clan which took over the

reins of the Ahom Dynasty with Gadadhar Singha continued to hold its sway till the decline and fall of the Dynasty in the second decade of the 19th century, when Assam passed into the hands of the British by the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. ⁽²²⁰⁾

“The accession of Gadadhar Singha and the restoration of a strong monarchy after a virtual interregnum marked a new era in Assam's history, both in domestic and foreign affairs. The fruits of having a strong ruler was visible from the very beginning. At home he revived the monarchy. The days of phantom rulers and unscrupulous, ambitious king-makers and Ministers were over. The monarchs once again became supreme and strong enough not only to curb the pretensions of the grasping nobles, but also to break their monopoly and influence. Internal dissensions and corruptions ceased. While conspiracies were crushed, the administrative system was reformed.....Gadadhar expanded the limits of the kingdom to the west by flagging the nationalist spirit.” ⁽²²¹⁾

Indubitably, the socio-political stability which the termination of the Mughal threat brought to the Ahom kingdom by the Saraighat Battle was responsible for the socio-cultural renaissance which ensued soon afterwards. Gadadhar Singha, being determined to restore the authority of the throne and the rule of law to the land, began the process of establishing the political stability needed for such a renaissance. Moreover, Gadapani had been a fugitive for a number of years and had roamed around the country evading capture; this made him familiar with the deteriorating living conditions of ordinary people due to bad governance, and induced his determination to carry out measures to better their lot.

Familiar with the problems of his subjects, such as the non-availability of unpolluted water and the lack of good roads which hindered communication, Gadadhar Singha undertook a concerted effort to create an infrastructure to tackle these. Dozens of large *pukhuris* or water-tanks were dug in various places of the kingdom; these were situated on higher ground so that flood-waters would not enter and contaminate them. In order to improve land communication a number of *alis* or roads were constructed. Another detailed survey of the kingdom and its subjects was taken. Land holdings were measured, but this time with the type of measurement introduced by the Mughals in Lower Assam, with surveyors from Bengal being brought for the purpose.

However, the most remarkable mirror of Assamese nationalism during the Ahom era, as also the socio-cultural efflorescence, brought about by an icon like Lachit Barphukan and his exploits in the time of Chakradhwaj Singha, was to be seen during the reign of Sukhrungpha (1696-1714), also known as Rudra Singha, the elder son of Gadadhar Singha and Sati Jaimati and indubitably one of the greatest of Ahom kings.

For the Assamese subjects of the Ahom kingdom, the Rudra Singha era was a golden period. There was economic self-sufficiency, as well as relative peace. This Ahom monarch understood that the key to greater prosperity as well as cultural advancement was through increased intercourse with neighbouring realms and expansion of trade with them. He opened out the economy of Assam and encouraged native *saudagars* or merchants to carry on trade in indigenous commodities with traders from elsewhere. Unlike his predecessors, who followed a policy of commercial insulation, Rudra Singha understood the

potential of exporting exotic items of trade sought after elsewhere and importing diamonds, gems and other items to enrich the Ahom Empire. Thus the westernmost, well-located trading outpost called Hadirachowki or Assamchowki as well as adjacent places like Goalpara all of a sudden became hives of business activity, thereby swelling the imperial coffers.

Artisans of proven merit — ironsmiths, brass-workers, masons, goldsmiths, apothecaries, tailors etc. — were brought to the kingdom, given land and allowed to practice their professions here. To train up local jewellers in the proper manner of encrusting gems on golden utensils and artifacts, jewellers and goldsmiths were brought in from distant province of Marwar in north-west India. Rudra Singha even introduced new dresses styled in the manner of those worn by people of other parts of India and made it a rule that Assamese women should wear *Riha-mekhela*.

It could be said that during the reign of this great king Assamese society was emancipated. Like Emperors in other parts of India, in particular the Mughals, Rudra Singha had scholars, musicians and seers in his court, special seats for them being reserved whenever the monarch held a meeting of his council. His aim was to pick everything good about other societies and introduce it into Assamese society while encouraging local arts. In order to strengthen and enrich Assamese culture he brought about the fusion of local classical and folk dances and music with their counterparts from other regions of India, using the remarkable cultural renaissance ushered in by the Vaishnav monks for this purpose. Literary works were translated, art-forms like creation of golden manuscripts reached a peak and dance-dramas based on classical themes were composed. Also, the king drew not merely from other parts of India for cultural inspiration; he more than anyone else

was aware of the rich cultural heritage of the various tribes of this region and tapped into their music and dances to widen the base of a broader Assamese culture.

“Rudra Singha had the advantage of the solid foundations laid by his father and raised a superstructure thereon..... Moreover, inheriting a peaceful dominion with a stable Government the new king, who excelled his father in statesmanship, could not only devote his time in pursuing the measures introduced by his father for the improvement of the country but also formulate a new programme to strengthen it still further and transform it into a first rate power in India. At home he suppressed conspiracies and rebellions, established peace and order, reformed the administration and remodelled the army. He stopped the persecution of the Vaishnav sects, built temples, had several public works of utility to his credit viz., tanks, masonry bridges and the like, and above all patronised art, literature and culture. He even sought to establish extensive commercial relations with Tibet and cultural contacts with Bengal..... Gadadhar's reign was just the dawn of a new age in Assam, of which the noon-tide splendour came under his son Rudra Singha.” (222)

Without doubt during the reign of Swargadeo Sukhrungpha there was an economic, intellectual and cultural efflorescence unmatched by any in preceding periods. His reign marked the apotheosis of Assamese nationalism and bore testimony to the remarkable legacy of Lachit Barphukan, a legacy which, not surprisingly, has endured till even modern times!



Such a legacy proved to be the fountainhead of the inspiring flow which washed over Assamese society in

the subsequent centuries. All through the freedom movement following Assam's annexation by British imperialists it had been the spirit of Saraighat and of Lachit, his compulsive abhorrence of domination by a foreign force and resolve to fight it, which had been a motivating force impelling the *satyagrahis* in their struggle to wrest back their motherland's independence.

Scholar like Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, therefore, rightly observes that: "The crisis through which the Assamese passed in their conflicts with the Mughals during the four years 1667 to 1671 was a momentous one and the manner in which they succeeded in overcoming it, magnificent and eternally inspiring..... Assamese leadership was not deficient in the qualities which ensure the solidarity and stability of a nation. These qualities are in greater demand now than before as many complex political, economic and social problems are waiting for solution by us as Indians in our role as an independent nation. The example of Lachit Barphukan and his selfless compatriots of Saraighat will be a source of inspiration not only to my countrymen in Assam but also to my friends in the rest of India." (223)

Indeed, Assam during the post-independence period has passed through a number of existential crises which have been confronted by the people with the name of Saraighat and Lachit on their lips. Whether during the "language movement," or the demands to get a refinery or a bridge over the Brahmaputra for the State, forces of Assamese nationalism have carried on their struggle with the thought of Lachit and Saraighat in their minds.

In a milieu where, due to inimical demographic changes, the very survival of the Assamese has been put to the question, it is Lachit and his exploits which have

sustained those combating the hostile forces. The people of Assam embarked on an epical, six-year long mass movement against illegal infiltration of foreigners with the memory of Lachit as their inspiring guide. The biggest lesson that Lachit's exploits have for the people of Assam and the North-East is, of course, that in unity lies strength, and that a divided society is a debilitated and vulnerable society. It may be recalled that the constituents of Lachit's force comprised every ethnic segment of the amorphous Assamese society, as also some hill tribes, who presented a unified front to the enemy, and defeated them. This drives home the reality that unless the current fissiparous tendencies afflicting the North-East in general, and Assam in particular, are eradicated, the survival of the indigenous communities against the alien forces will be imperilled.

The exploits of Lachit Barphukan and the battle of Saraighat have the capacity to inspire India as the country marches towards its rightful place in the global scenario. Today, the nation faces innumerable challenges from hostile neighbours as well as from other segments of the international community. These challenges can be met only if every citizen displays the kind of selfless, disinterested patriotism and the resolute courage of which Assam's Braveheart, Lachit Barphukan, was an eternal embodiment.



Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, the pioneering historian-biographer who had been one of the earliest of scholars to focus on Assam's Braveheart, has this encomium in his portrayal of Lachit: "The most outstanding feature of Lachit Barphukan's character was his high sense of honour. It is an indefinable quality, though in its implications it

comprises all that is good and noble in a man's character. It means the respect shown, both by intentions and actions, to an unwritten code of private and public conduct, the contravention of which would not entail any material injury upon the transgressor. In our private and domestic relations it means the ungrudging fulfilment of our promises, and of the expectations and hopes we have raised in others' minds by our conduct, words and attitude. In public life, it is equivalent to wholehearted devotion to one's duty without any consideration of personal gain or advantage. The man of honour is straightforward and just, and he adheres to his principles in the face of opposition and discomfort. Casuistries, sophistries and subterfuges and stilted efforts to justify perversities are unknown to an honourable man. His tribunal is the common sense of his countrymen and the verdict of posterity. Recognitions and benefits do not constitute the motives of his actions; rewards are too mundane, and he precludes from the inventory of conditions in his services to his country. Such a man can be entrusted with the gravest responsibilities which he will discharge without the vigilance of a supervisor, for he cherishes in his heart the greatest of all supervisors — his own conscience. Though he is sensitive to attributions of cowardice and meanness, he is indifferent to the calumnies of interested opponents and the uncritical rabble as he is true to himself, and is unshakeable in his faith in the moral order of the Universe." (224)

While "recognitions and benefits" may not have constituted the motives for his actions, and he may not have even been aware of the historical role that he played, yet posterity has acknowledged that Lachit Barphukan was one of the greatest Assamese to have trod the soil of his beloved motherland. In recognition of this reality, in Assam

Lachit Divas is celebrated on 24 November each year to commemorate his heroism and the victory of the Assamese in the Saraighat Battle.

It is now widely believed and accepted that Lachit Barphukan was laid to rest in a mausoleum built by the Ahom monarch Swargadeo Udayaditya Singha at the Narahilaydari village in the Hoolungapara Mauza, 16 km from the Upper Assam town of Jorhat. A life-size statue of Lachit, painted in white, has been erected at the site. The *maidam* has been built up as a tourist attraction by the State Government and a structure, fashioned in the Ahom style of architecture, festooned with their sacred symbol the dragon, has been constructed. The site draws a number of visitors every year.

The Assam State Government has also set up the Saraighat War Memorial Park at Agiyathuri on the north bank of Brahmaputra River in memory of the 1671 Battle of Saraighat. While a bronze plate enlightens visitors with the details of that war, bronze and fibre glass statues of Ahom warriors in battle postures reminds them of the battle that took place there over three and a half centuries ago.

Somewhat belatedly, at the initiative of Lt Gen (Retd) S. K. Sinha, former Governor of Assam and a former Vice-Chief of the Indian Army, the Indian armed forces have taken cognizance of Lachit Barphukan, the brilliant military strategist, by having his statue installed in 1999 at the entrance of the National Defence Academy at Khadakvasala near Pune, Maharashtra. While the Lachit Barphukan gold medal is awarded to the best cadet from the Defence Academy, an annual lecture on the great General is held each year.

However, even more important than these physical manifestations of the nation's admiration of this great

military figure is the revered place Assam's Braveheart, Lachit Barphukan, occupies in the collective consciousness of the Assamese people and the love and admiration he inspires in every Assamese heart.





REFERENCES AND NOTES

(01) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 212.

(02) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, Page1.

(03) *ibid*, page-1-2.

(04) Accounts of Sukapha's journey to Assam can be had in *buranjis* (chronicles) such as *Purani Asam Buranji*, *Deodhai Asom Buranji*, *Tungkhungiya Asam Buranji*, *Rai Saheb Golapchandra Baruar Ahom Buranji*, *Harakanta Barua Sadaraminar Asam Buranji*, *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, *Itihase Suonra Sashata Bachar*, Sarbananda Rajkumar etc.

(05) Quoted from *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 244.

(06) *ibid*, page 249.

(07) *Aspects of the Heritage of Assam*, page 91, quoted in *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 251.

(08) A detailed account of the rise and fall of the Koch Kingdom can be had in books such as *Kuch Bihar and Assam*, H. Blochmann.

(09) *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, pages 52-53.

(10) *ibid*, pages 56-57.

(11) The author of the Mughal chronicles *Padishahnamah* provides a detailed account of this, as do the Ahom *buranjis* and *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 110.

(12) *ibid*, pages 112-114.

(13) The terms of the treaty are mentioned in various *buranjis*, the *Padishahnamah*, *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, as also in various history books regarding the Ahom Dynasty.

(14) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 164.

(15) *ibid*, pages 165-167.

(16) All *buranjis* do not agree as to how Sutyinpha was removed or how he died. Some, for instance, hold that he was poisoned while others claim that he voluntarily abdicated from the throne and died a natural death.

(17) Many of the Ahom *buranjis*, as also the various books on this dynasty by historians like Gait, Bhuyan, Hiteshwar Barbarua, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari etc. give detailed accounts of these developments.

(18) *Riazu-a-Salatin*, translated into English by A. Salam, 1904, page 223, as quoted in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan page 22.

(19) *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, pages 22-23.

(20) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, pages 169-170.

(21) *ibid*, page 171.

(22) *ibid*, page 171.

- (23) The author of the *Fathiyah-i-Ibriyah* gives the following description of the fort at Jogighopa: "It is a large high fort on the Brahmaputra. Near it the enemy had dug many holes for the horses to fall into, and pointed pieces of bamboo (*Panjis*) had been stuck in the holes. Behind the holes, for about half a shot's distance, on even ground, they had made a ditch, and behind this ditch, near the fort, another one three yards deep. The latter was also full of pointed bamboos. This is how the Ahoms fortify all their positions. They make their forts of mud. The Brahmaputra is south of the fort and on the east is Monas." — Cited in *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait.
- (24) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 176.
- (25) *ibid*, page 176. Though mention of this naval battle and defeat of the Ahoms is described in Mughal chronicles, the Ahom *buranjis*, surprisingly, make no mention of it.
- (26) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 177. In *Atan Buragohain and his Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan too provides details about the strategy adopted by this astute Commander in his attempt to ultimately defeat the Mughals.
- (27) *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, pages 136-137.
- (28) *ibid*, page 137.
- (29) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 178.
- (30) *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 139.
- (31) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 181.
- (32) Quoted from *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 139.
- (33) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 185.

(34) *ibid*, page 187.

(35) Many of the Ahom *buranjis*, as also the various books on this dynasty by historians like Gait, Bhuyan, Hiteswar Barbarua, H. K. Barpujari etc. give detailed accounts of these developments.

(36) *Ramani Gabharu, or Rahmat Banu*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan. Also, Lachit Barphukan and His Times, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 6.

(37) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 6.

(38) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, H. K. Barpujari, page 190.

(39) This date does not tally with some other histories. *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, for example, gives it as March 31, 1663. The place where he died is also mentioned differently in different sources.

(40) *A Description of Assam from the Alamgirnama*, MuhammadKazim, translated by H. Vansittart.

(41) "The statement of this writer is confirmed by Colonel Dalton who reported that several mounds, known to be graves of Ahom kings, were opened and were found to contain the remains of slaves and animals, and also gold and silver vessels, raiment, arms etc." Quoted from *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 152.

(42) Translation by Prof. Jadunath Sarkar, *Journal of the Bihar and Bengal Research Society, Volume I*, as quoted in *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, pages 144-155.

(43) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 197.

(44) Almost all the *Assam Buranjis* refer to this.

(45) The *Assam Buranji* quoted in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 36.

- (46) *ibid*, page 37.
- (47) *Jayantia Buranji*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, 1937, pages 22-23.
- (48) *ibid*, page 24.
- (49) *The Assam Buranji*, quoted in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 38, and *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 9.
- (50) *ibid*, page 39 and page 8.
- (51) *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 41.
- (52) The developments regarding succession after Jaydhwaj Singha's death are described in detail in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, pages 40-41.
- (53) *Golap Chandra Baruar Ahom Buranji*, as quoted in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 43.
- (54) *The Assam Buranji*, quoted in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 43-44.
- (55) *ibid*, page 44-45.
- (56) *ibid*, page 46.
- (57) Quoted from *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 46-48.
- (58) *The Assam Buranji*, quoted in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 11.
- (59) Quoted from *The Brahmaputra*, Arup Kumar Dutta, pages 184-185.
- (60) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 12.
- (61) *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 48.
- (62) *ibid*, page 49.
- (63) *ibid*, page 49.
- (64) *ibid*, page 50.

- (65) *ibid*, page 50.
- (66) *ibid*, page 50.
- (67) *ibid*, page 51.
- (68) *ibid*, page 51.
- (69) *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 156-157.
- (70) *The Assam Buranji*, quoted in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page, pages 52-53.
- (71) *ibid*, page 53
- (72) *Lachit Barphukan, the National Hero*, Birendra Kumar Gohain, Foreword.
- (73) *ibid*
- (74) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and his Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 13.
- (75) *ibid*, page 15.
- (76) *ibid*, page 15.
- (77) *ibid*, page 16,
- (78) *ibid*, page 16.
- (79) *ibid* page 17.
- (80) *Lachitar Kahini*, K. Buragohain, as quoted in *Lachit Barphukan and his Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 17.
- (81) Quoted from *The Legend of Lachit Borphukan*, Nilotpall Gohain, page 103.
- (82) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited H. K. Barpujari, page 205.
- (83) *The Assam Buranji*, as quoted in *Lachit Barphukan and his Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 19.
- (84) *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 157.
- (85) *The Purani Assam Buranji*, quoted in *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited H. K. Barpujari, page 206.
- (86) *The Assam Buranji*, as cited in *Lachit Barphukan and his Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 19.

- (87) *ibid*, page 20.
- (88) *ibid*, page 20.
- (89) *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 207.
- (90) Quoted from *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 56.
- (91) *ibid*, page 58.
- (92) *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 158.
- (93) *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 158.
- (94) *The Assam Buranji*, as quoted in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 21.
- (95) *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 159.
- (96) *The Assam Buranji*, as quoted in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, by Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 58.
- (97) As contained in the unpublished sections of *The Assam Buranji*, but mentioned in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, pages 22-23.
- (98) *ibid*, page 23.
- (99) *The Assam Buranji*, as quoted in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 60.
- (100) *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 209.
- (101) *A list of the military outposts and fortifications of Assam, compiled about 1681*, Upendra Chandra Lekharu, published in the *Avahan*, pages 248-250.
- (102) *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 59.
- (103) *The Assam Buranji*, as quoted in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 59.
- (104) *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 60.
- (105) *Akhbarat-i-darbar-i-Muala*, quoted by Jadunath Sarkar and *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 60.

(106) These descriptions can be found in full details in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, pages 28 – 31.

(107) Quoted from *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 159. The strength of the expedition is not stated in the *Alamgirnamah*, where the subject is dealt with briefly. These figures are taken from the *buranjis*.

(108) Quoted from *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 61.

(109) *Sikh Religion, Volume IV*, Max Arthur Macauliffe, page 348.

(110) *Alamgir-namah*, quoted by Blochmann, as cited in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 24.

(111) *Memorandum on Ram Singha* as reproduced in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan pages 132-33.

(112) Quoted from *The Legend of Lachit Borphukan*, Nilotpal Gohain, page 129.

(113) *Annals of the Delhi Badshahate*, as quoted in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, pages 24-25.

(114) *Purani Assam Buranji*, H. C. Goswami, as quoted in *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 62.

(115) *Sikh Religion*, Macauliffe, pages 348-352.

(116) Quoted in the *Annals of the Delhi Badshahate*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, 165-166.

(117) Quoted in *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 235.

(118) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 26.

- (119) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 32.
- (120) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 32.
- (121) *The Ahom Buranjis* as cited in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 32-33.
- (122) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 213.
- (123) *The Ahom Buranjis* as cited in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 33.
- (124) This incident is mentioned, among other works, in *Ahomar Din*, by Hiteswar Barbarua, pages 212-13. The incident and statement was very much present in the folklore tradition of Assam and Assamese people without exception assume that these are true.
- (125) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 33.
- (126) *ibid*, page 34
- (127) *ibid*, page 34.
- (128) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, SuryyaKumarBhuyan.
- (129) *ibid*, page 34
- (130) *ibid*, page-34-35.
- (131) Quoted from *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, pages 55-65.
- (132) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 35.
- (133) *ibid*, page 35. In the *Ahom Buranji* compiled by S. K. Dutta, "Syed Firoz Nabab died in captivity." According to the *Kamarpur Buranji*, Syed Firoz's son Pahar Khan, fled from captivity. According to another *AhomBuranji* Ram Singha demanded the release of Syed Firoz's son. But the

Alamgirnamah gives a totally different version and states that Syed Firoz Khan, the Gauhati Thanadar, and most of his men bravely defended themselves and sacrificed their lives on the path of duty." Thus there is some confusion as to what exactly became of the erstwhile Faujadar of Gauhati.

(134) *ibid*, page 35.

(135) *ibid*, page 36.

(136) *ibid*, page 37.

(137) *ibid*, page 38.

(138) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, pages 215-216.

(139) *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 38.

(140) *ibid*, page 39.

(141) *The Ahoms, A Reimagined History*, Arup Kumar Dutta, page 214.

(142) Descriptive list of farmans, mansurs and nishans etc. Rajasthan State Archives, reproduced in *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 217.

(143) *The Ahom buranjis*, quoted in *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page-217-18.

(144) *ibid*, page 218.

(145) Cited from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 219.

(146) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 40.

(147) *The Ahoms, A Reimagined History*, Arup Kumar Dutta, page 215.

(148) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 44.

Apparently, the Mughal Commanders were addicted to

bhang, described by Manucci as a beverage made of “the leaves of ground hemp ground down, which intoxicates as soon as was taken. Aurangzeb also wanted to suppress this disorder. But, seeing that the Ministers themselves drank and loved to get drunk, the rigor of prohibition was lightened by degrees.” *Storia do Mogor*, translated by Irvine. *Dhatura*, thornapple or stramonium, was used as a substitute for hemp and produces stronger results.

(149) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan. Page 41.

(150) *ibid*, page 42.

(151) *ibid*, page 40.

(152) *ibid*, pages 42-43.

(153) *ibid*, page 43.

(154) *ibid*, page 43-44.

(155) *ibid*, page 40.

(156) *ibid*, page 41.

(157) *Baniya-Kakatir-Bangsavali*, Kesabkanta Barua, pages 50-52 as quoted in *LachitBarphukanand His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 46.

(158) *Ahom Buranji*, Golap Chandra Barua, pages 208-209 as quoted in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya kumar Bhuyan, pages 46-47.

(159) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 46.

(160) *ibid*, page 47.

(161) *ibid*, page 47.

(162) *ibid*, page 47.

(163) *ibid*, pages 47-48.

(164) *ibid*, page 48. The *Massir-ul-Umara*, translated by Beverage and Baini Prashad, mentions that Luthuri Rajkhowa had been taken to Delhi along with other Assamese prisoners by Mir Jumla.

(165) *ibid*, page 48.

(166) *ibid*, page 49.

(167) *ibid*, page 49.

(168) *ibid*, page 50.

(169) *ibid*, page 51.

(170) *Purani Assam Buranji*, H. C. Goswami, pages 147-150.

Also, *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan.

(171) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 172. It may be noted that Panditrai was most probably a title and not a name, and this diplomat was in the service of both Shaista Khan and Ram Singha. It may also be noted that the title of "Pandit Rao" was conferred by Shivaji on his confidential Minister and Chief Justice Raghunath Bhai Pant Ballal who headed the Maratha peace mission to Jai Singha. *Maratha People*, Kincaid and Parasnis.

(172) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan.

(173) *ibid*.

(174) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 53,

(175) *A History of Assam*, Sir Edward Gait, page 160.

(176) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 53.

(177) *ibid*, page 56,

(178) *ibid*. page 54,

(179) *ibid*, page 54,

(180) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 180.

(181) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan. Page 55.

- (182) *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 224.
- (183) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 55. However, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari states that the message was not brought by Rasip Khan but by Munawwar Khan.
- (184) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, as also in *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 227.
- (185) *The Ahoms, A Reimagined History*, Arup Kumar Dutta, page 219.
- (186) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 56, as also in *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari.
- (187) *ibid.*
- (188) *Deodhai Assam Buranji*, translated by Surya Kumar Bhuyan. For instance, the Ahom monarch Pratap Singha (1603-1641) had asserted: "I shall not spare the man who will act in contravention of the orders of my astrologers and Deodhais."
- (189) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 57.
- (190) *Sandikipa, Part 1*, K. N. Bardoloi. Some other *Buranjis* avow that the Barphukan was carried on his bed by the four Bhuyans which was then placed on the boat.
- (191) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 57.
- (192) *The Ahom Buranjis* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 57. Also, *Purani*

Assam *Buranji* translated by H. C. Goswami and his *Saraighatar Yudha, Usha*.

(193) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 227.

(194) *Saraighatar Yudha, Usha*, H. C. Goswami and *The Ahom Buranji* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan.

(195) *The Ahom Buranji* as quoted in in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 59.

(196) *ibid*, page-94-95.

(197) *ibid*, page 96.

(198) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan,

(199) *Akkbarat-i-darbar-i-Muala*, Royal Asiatic Society, quoted in *Aurangzeb*, Jadunath Sarkar.

(200) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan,

(201) Quoted from *Aurangzeb*, Jadunath Sarkar.

(202) This figure is mentioned in *Aurangzeb*, Jadunath Sarkar. The figure 40 for Ram Singha was based on *Ahom Buranji*, Golap Chandra Barua.

(203) *Assam Buranji*, as cited in *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, SuryyaKumarBhuyan, page 106.

(204) Referred to in an old *buranji* translated by K. N. Bardoloi, as cited in *LachitBarphukanandHisTimes*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, page 107.

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(208) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, page 229.

(209) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, SuryyaKumarBhuyan, page 60.

(210) *ibid*, page 61

(211) *ibid*. The book also notes that "In the light of the facts revealed in the chronicles mentioned above, we are led to the conclusion that Churamoni, also known as Samudra Churamoni, was no other than Achyutananda Doloi; and before the conferment of the title *Samudra-Khari* by Swargadeo Udayaditya Singha, Achyutananda was popularly known as Churamoni for his astronomical learning, and as Kavi Saraswati for his poetical talents."

(212) *Purani Assam Buranji*, H. C. Goswami.

(213) *Maasir-ul-Umara*, and *Storia de Mogor*, manucci, translated by Irvine etc.

(214) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, which also mentions various sources for the above conclusions.

(215) *Brihat Tai Jati*, by Rameshwar Chetia Bora, for example, asserts that Lachit Barphukan did not die from the illness during the Saraighat Battle but another malady and was buried in a *maidam* at Hoolungpara which local people believe to be his.

(216) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari.

(217) The above developments are mentioned in details in most of the Ahom *buranjis* as well in works of the modern historians.

(218) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan.

(219) The above developments are mentioned in details in most of the Ahom *buranjis* as well in works of the modern historians.

(220) Various Ahom *buranjis*, including the *Tungkhungiya buranji*, translated by Surrya Kumar Bhuyan, give details of this period.

(221) Quoted from *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, edited by H. K. Barpujari, pages 258-259

(222) *ibid*, 264-65.

(223) Quoted from *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Surrya Kumar Bhuyan.

(224) *ibid*.





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